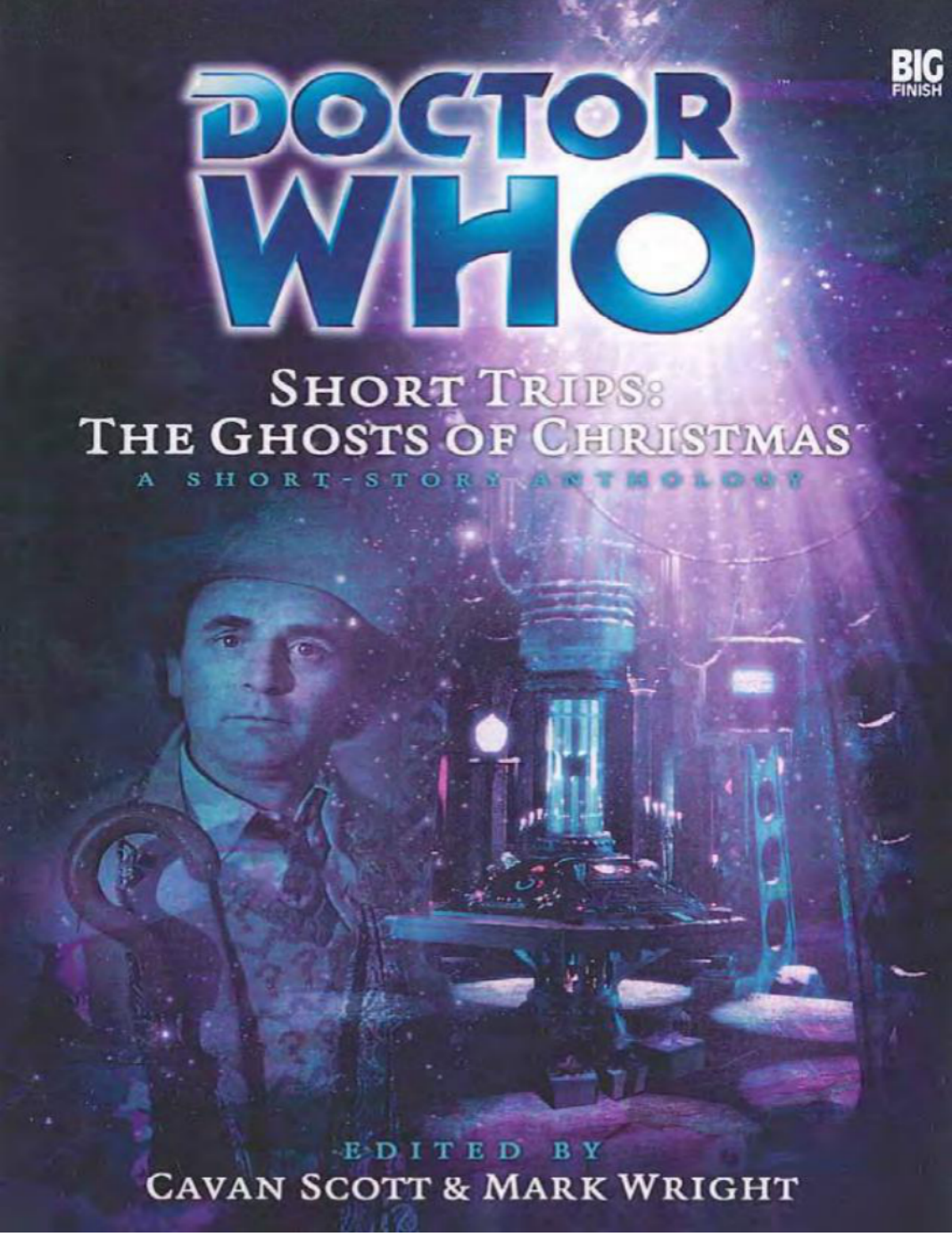
BIG FINISH

DOCTOR WHO

SHORT TRIPS: THE GHOSTS OF CHRISTMAS

A SHORT-STORY ANTHOLOGY



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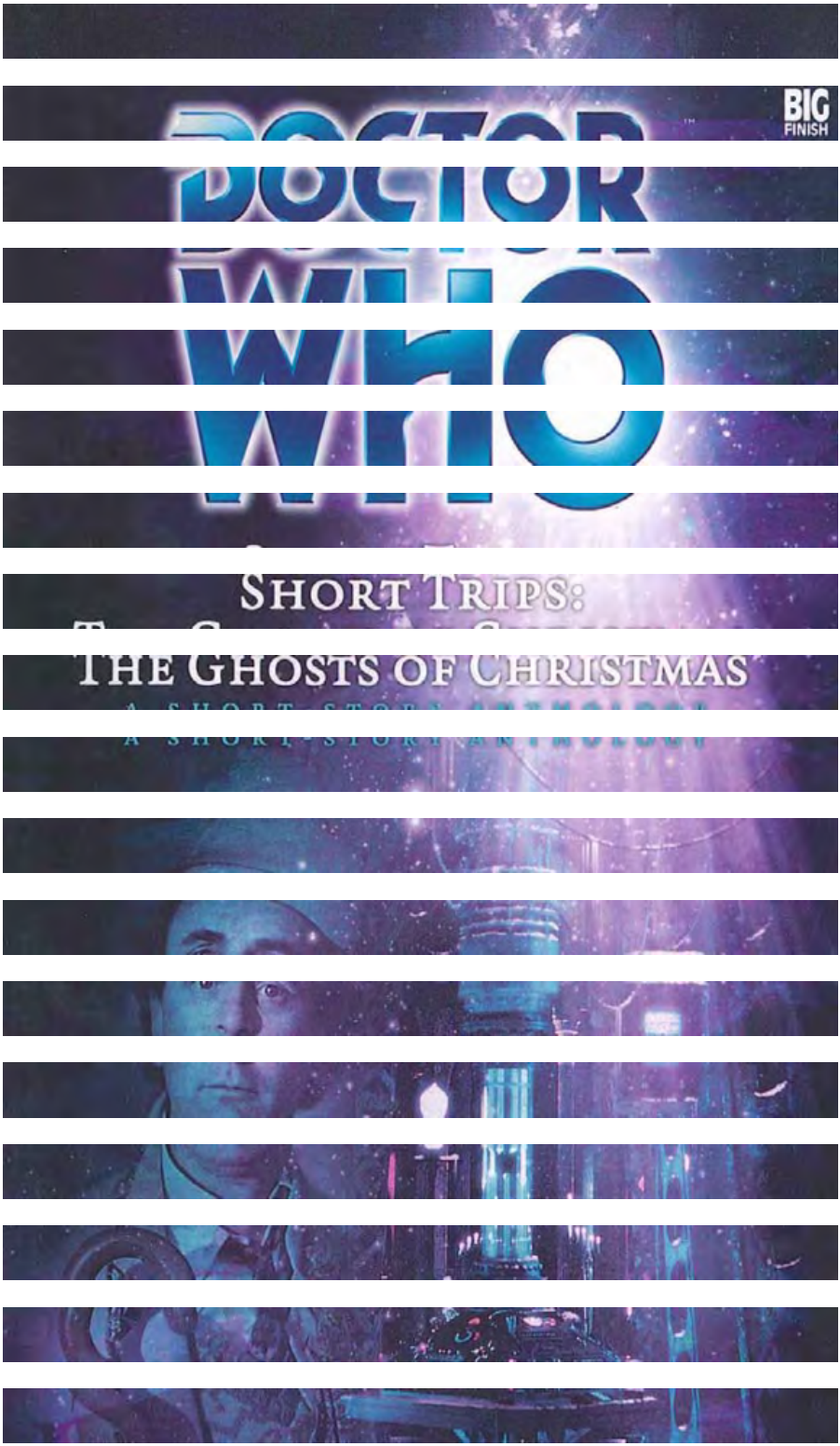
BIG FINISH
DOCTOR WHO
SHORT TRIPS:
THE GHOSTS OF CHRISTMAS

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To Grandma, for all the Christmases Past — M.W.

To Chloe, for all the Christmases Yet to Come — C.S.

‘I will honour Christmas in my heart, and try to keep it all the year.

I will live in the Past, the Present, and the Future.

The spirits of all Three shall strive within me.’

– *A Christmas Carol*, Charles Dickens

Christmas Past

‘These are but shadows of the things that have been,’ said the Ghost.

– *A Christmas Carol*, Charles Dickens

Faithful Friends: Part One

Cavan Scott & Mark Wright

An Adventure of the Third Doctor, with the Brigadier

The rhythmic scratching of an expensive and well-used fountain pen was the only sound in the office. A single desk lamp illuminated the document the figure at the large mahogany desk was working

diligently on, the rectangle of window behind him fading from deep inky blue into the deeper darkness of a cold December evening.

The figure seated at the desk made a definite flourish with the pen, signing a well-practised signature:

Alistair Gordon Lethbridge-Stewart, Brig.

With quick, efficient moves, he picked up a stamp that sat in neatly ordered place amongst the sparse accoutrements on the desk, brought it down firmly on the document and returned it to its place by the ink pad. The Brigadier breathed out with a satisfied sense ofjob done and closed the stiff card cover of the file. He pushed his chair back and rose to his feet, his back aching after a stint of UNIT paperwork more than it ever used to. He turned to the window, feeling his constricted spine click and crack back into place. Let him face down an Anton or a

Cyberman and he was the happiest soldier alive, but give Alistair Gordon Lethbridge-Stewart a stack of paperwork to do, and he was

groaning like an old man these days.

With a rueful smile, he looked out over the darkened car part of

UNIT HQ. It was quiet as the grave – on any given day, the car park was usually a hive of activity. Smudges of green naming back and

forth, shouted orders, the crunch of booted fret as platoons were drilled, vehicles thundering from one side of the grounds to the other, even the odd explosion and cloud of foul-smelling smoke billowing out of Sergeant Osgood's workshop.

But not tonight. Tonight was special, sacred. A time for family and friends.

Yes, even UNIT closed for business on Christmas Eve.

A brisk knock at the door pulled the Brigadier from his thoughts and he turned smartly on his heel, barking, ‘Come!’

The door opened and Sergeant Benton entered, a festive ring of holly shuddering where it hung on the outside of the door, drawing attention to the lack of seasonal decoration within the office.

‘Ah, Benton,’ said the Brigadier. ‘All done?’

Benton saluted quickly. ‘Yes, sir, all personnel accounted for and leave approved.’

‘Excellent. And yourself? What plans for the holiday?’

Benton, abashed, smiled nervously, unused to such personal

questions from his superior. ‘My mother’s, sir. Same thing every year.

I have a boot full of presents for my nieces and nephews.’

The Brigadier nodded. An uncomfortable silence followed between

the two colleagues.

Benton coughed. ‘And... and yourself, sir?’

The Brigadier blinked, a look of embarrassed surprise on his face.

‘Me? Oh. The usual, I suppose.’

When the Brigadier clearly wasn’t going to elaborate on what the

usual entailed, Benton moved to leave. ‘Well, I’ll be off then, sir.

Merry Christmas.’ He made to salute, as always, but was surprised when the Brigadier smiled warmly and held out a hand.

‘Merry Christmas, Benton.’ The two men shook hands. ‘I had the

liberty of having a hamper delivered to your mother’s. I do hope you enjoy it. The port is particularly good.’

Benton visibly relaxed and returned the Brigadier’s handshake with renewed vigour. ‘Yes, sir. Thank you, sir. That’s...’

‘My pleasure, Benton. Now, be off with you before somebody

decides to invade.'

Sergeant Benton didn't need any further bidding and with a final

'Good night, sir,' he backed out and closed the door, leaving the Brigadier smiling fondly and shaking his head slightly.

The Brigadier stood for a second before returning to his desk and scooping up the file. He stooped to pick up a smart leather attache case, switched off the desk lamp and strode towards the door. He stepped through into the outer office and closed the door on his own darkened chamber, stopping by the neatly ordered desk that inhabited the outer office and dropping the file into a tray. His eyes were drawn to the bottle sitting on the side of the desk, a shiny bow wrapped round the neck. Smiling, the Brigadier picked up the bottle and unpicked the note attached to the side.

' *Merry Christmas, sir.* '

Corporal Bell, thought the Brigadier. Every year, without fail, a good bottle of malt. He hefted the bottle and made his way into the warren of 4

corridors that made up UNIT HQ.

The old place never felt right when it was empty like this. Even

though the mansion had only been UNIT's home for a comparatively

short time, every nook and cranny held memories for the Brigadier.

Here was the spot where Captain Turner had requested transfer back to the regulars so he could start building a future with the Watkins girl.

There, by the records office, the Brigadier had enjoyed his last clipped conversation with Miss Shaw as she'd reminded him, one final time, that she was a scientist not a soldier. The last he'd heard of her, she was expecting her first child. The sharp smile that twitched beneath the immaculate moustache failed for a minute as the cold realisation of how many goodbyes had been said within these walls, how many

colleagues had moved on...

The Brigadier stepped up his pace, brisk and businesslike again. No sense for a chap to wallow in nostalgia just because it was Christmas.

One final turn of the west wing before handing over to the holiday relief, shutting those Christmas ghosts away for another year. Wanted to get on the road as soon as possible to avoid any idiots who'd

climbed behind the wheel a little too full of the festive spirit.

He pushed through a pair of double doors, which banged back and

forth in his wake as he continued his route into a part of the building that he rarely visited these days...

What the devil was that? The Brigadier came to an abrupt stop and cocked his head on one side, listening.

Singing.

Someone was singing. Sighing, the Brigadier spun on his heel and

marched in the direction of the song, muttering 'Liberty Hall,' irritably under his breath. Probably a squaddie having imbibed too much of

Osgood's Christmas home brew in the mess. But, as he turned the

corner and realised the origin of what could only be called

caterwauling, a smile spread across his face and he allowed himself a slight chuckle. Typical!

The Doctor couldn't have heard the Brigadier enter the lab. He had his sapphire-blue jacketed back to him, his enthusiastic baritone positively vibrating the light fittings. The Brigadier couldn't place the song, something about a love machine and feeding fantasies or some such.

Probably Martian, knowing the Doctor.

The Brigadier tried a polite cough, waited, and then tried a slightly less polite one.

The Doctor's head snapped around, taking his attention away from

what he was doing for a split second, long enough for the delicate mish-mash of apparatus on the workbench to topple noisily into a heap.

‘Oh, good grief,’ he exclaimed, his voice full of indignation. ‘Now look what you made me do!’

‘Sorry, Doctor, I was just...’

‘You’re always “just” doing something, Brigadier,’ retorted the

Doctor, rubbing the back of his neck. ‘Usually getting under my feet.’

He fixed the Brigadier with a piercing gaze. ‘Do you know how long I’ve been working on the fragile equipment you just reduced to a... a...

pile of junk?’ He didn’t wait for an answer. ‘Seven hours. Seven hours of painstaking construction ruined in the blink of an eye by your ham-fisted, clod-hopping...’

‘Now steady on, Doctor,’ the Brigadier bristled, ready for one of their famous arguments, but he made a half-hearted attempt to appease him. ‘Was it important, your erm... gizmo?’

‘Important? Of course it was important. My “gizmo”, as you so

colourfully put it, was a multi-phasic, warp-rigged retro-scanning beam emitter. If I’d been left alone for just one more hour I’d have been able to isolate and gauge the lifespan of aqueous intelligent plankton life living in the atmosphere of Nigellus II.’

The Brigadier held the Doctor’s gaze. ‘Well,’ he mumbled

uncertainly, ‘I suppose that’s useful.’

‘Yes,’ the Doctor hissed. ‘It is, if you are of a mind to isolate and gauge the lifespan of aqueous intelligent plankton.’ The Doctor gazed down at his workbench sadly. ‘Back to the drawing board, I suppose.’

The Brigadier seized his chance. ‘Well, I’m sorry to interrupt,

Doctor, but I just wanted to ask you...’

The Doctor didn’t let him finish.

‘If I’d accompany you on another tedious wild goose chase? Itching to blow something up, Brigadier? What now? The Downing Street cat has been abducted by a UFO? Cilia Black has been revealed as a

Nestene infiltrator? Whatever it is, Brigadier, I’m afraid I have better things to do with my time. Now, if you will excuse me...’

‘Actually,’ the Brigadier continued, ignoring the Doctor’s outburst,

‘I was just wondering if you had finished for the night or are you staying on? I’m eager to get off, you see, and I need to let the holiday relief know…’

The Doctor looked up from where he was gathering the remnants of

his failed experiment.

‘Holiday relief? Whatever are you talking about, man?’

‘I’m shutting up shop, Doctor. It is Christmas, after all.’

It was as if a light had clicked on behind the Time Lord’s eyes.

‘Christmas? Did you say Christmas?’

‘Yes, Christmas,’ the Brigadier repeated, his eyes widening briefly in frustration.

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‘My dear fellow,’ the Doctor said, turning on a sixpence as he

beamed from ear to ear. ‘Why ever didn’t you say? I had no idea.’

‘And the paper chains, lanterns and enormous tree in the canteen

hadn’t given you the slightest due?’

‘Brigadier, I haven’t eaten in that filthy canteen for years. It should have been shut down long ago on eight counts of galactic health-and-safety violations. Well, what are you waiting for?’ The Doctor was a flash of lanky blue as he abandoned his experiment and strode

elegantly across the lab to unhook that familiar cape with an overly impressive flourish. He smiled genially at the Brigadier. ‘Let’s get this place locked up, eh? Get you back to hearth and home to enjoy the festivities.’

Shaking his head at his friend’s famous mood swings, the Brigadier allowed himself to be swept out of the lab and down the corridor.

‘I’m not so sure about festivities, Doctor. Just a splash of port, a comfy chair and a good book for me this year.’ And every year, he added to himself. The Doctor looked appalled.

‘That settles it, then. You’re coming to me.’

‘I am?’ The Brigadier was somewhat taken back. In all the years

since the Doctor’s exile to Earth, he’d never invited the Brigadier to his mysterious home: the country pile, spoken of in such gushing tones by Miss Grant, which nobody quite knew how the Doctor had acquired.

‘We’ll take Bessie, of course.’

By now, the Brigadier had utterly resigned himself to his fate. ‘Of course.’

‘Excellent! Now, what’s that you’re hiding under your arm?’

‘Oh, just a bottle of malt. Present from Corporal Bell. Nice gesture, I thought.’

‘Indeed it is, Brigadier, and a fortunate one. I don’t think I’ve got a drop in the house.’

‘... and so the Slarvian in the Santa suit was left holding a rubber chicken!’ The Doctor roared with laughter at the conclusion of his story, a laugh that was taken up by the Brigadier just as

enthusiastically. His face had reddened ever so slightly and there were tears in his eyes from the volley of constant belly laughter that had accompanied dinner.

The two old friends sat at the solid oak table in the long kitchen that serviced the Doctor’s comfortable – and rather large – home. Before them lay the remains of their gastronomic enterprise, the remains of the largest roast goose the Brigadier had ever seen taking pride of place in the centre of the table. Quite how the bird had come to be already roasting in the impressive range cooker that dominated one wall of the 7

kitchen the Brigadier didn’t know, and he wasn’t about to ask. It was often best to just do as the Romans did when in the Doctor’s company; no questions asked. The Doctor’s claim that he didn’t have a drop in the house was something of a white lie, the fully stocked wine cellar beneath them having given forth several fine vintages, including a 1945 Chateau Mouton Rothschild. The Doctor drained the last of this fine claret into the Brigadier’s glass and sat back in his chair, stretching those long legs out in front of him.

‘I wonder how Miss Grant is spending Christmas,’ pondered the

Brigadier as he raised his glass.

‘How indeed,’ said the Doctor quietly.

‘Still no word?’

‘Not so much as a postcard.’ The Time Lord waved a hand before

his face in a dismissive gesture. ‘Jo is a free spirit, Brigadier. It’s in her blood, and that’s my fault more than anybody’s.’

‘Your fault?’

‘You can’t take somebody wandering through the stars and not

expect them to get a taste for adventure. Jo isn’t the first, and she won’t be the last.’ The Doctor leant forward and retrieved his glass, raising it in a toast. ‘To absent friends.’

‘Absent friends,’ the Brigadier agreed, raising his own glass. And what about you, Doctor? When do you become a free spirit again?’

The Doctor raised an eyebrow. ‘Are you trying to get rid of me,

Brigadier?’ he asked with mock accusation.

‘Not at all, not at all. But I have always been painfully aware that the nature of our arrangement is that UNIT needs you more than you need UNIT.’

‘“Arrangement”? That’s a very cold term. I thought we had a

friendship.’

‘You know what I mean, Doctor.’

‘Yes, I rather suspect I do.’ The Doctor spread his hands wide.

‘What can I say? I could drive back to UNIT HQ right now, step into the TARDIS and be on Barastabon, or walking through the ice caves of Magellan IV within seconds.’

‘But?’

‘But I don’t, and I’m at a loss to explain why. Throughout my exile, I

yearned to throw off the shackles the Time Lords had placed on me, wanted to wander through the fourth dimension unfettered with every fibre of my being. But now...'

The Brigadier raised a questioning eyebrow.

'Perhaps personal friendships can become stronger than what our

hearts desire the most.'

The Brigadier changed tack, not sure if he was entirely comfortable 8

with such honesty from the Doctor. 'Do you ever feel tired, Doctor?'

'Tired?' The Doctor frowned. 'No, never.' The Doctor sounded a

warning tone. 'Don't tell me you're thinking of retiring?'

'Oh, good lord, no! Still life in the old dog yet. But after everything we've been through. Yeti, Daleks, Axons, the Master...'

The Doctor raised a finger. 'And the terrible Zodin.'

'The who?'

The Doctor thought for a moment. 'Oh. No. Never mind.'

'The point being, I've been wondering a lot recently where it all ends. How much more can we take?'

'It never ends, Brigadier. The universe just keeps on going, and so must we, light and darkness poised in eternal balance.' The Doctor looked embarrassed at what he'd just said. 'A touch melodramatic, but you get the idea.'

The Brigadier nodded in silent agreement just as the clock hanging on the kitchen wall began to chime, followed a split second later by the rather fine grandfather clock in the hallway. The Doctor glanced up at the timepiece and smiled. 'Midnight I do believe it's Christmas Day.'

The Brigadier looked at his watch. 'Bless my soul, where did the

time go?'

The Doctor chuckled. 'Experience tells me that's a question best left unanswered.' He held his glass out to the Brigadier. 'Merry Christmas, Alistair.'

‘Merry Christmas, Doctor.’

Glasses chinked together and the two friends held each other’s gaze, the house silent save for the ticking of a clock and the crackle of a fire.

The moment was broken by a shrill ringing from the hallway and

both men blinked, pulled from the brink of words that would remain forever unsaid between them. Words that didn’t need to be said.

The Doctor rose and walked out into the hallway to answer the

phone. ‘Yes?’ the Brigadier heard the Doctor gruffly say. ‘What? Yes, of course.’ There was a pause as the Doctor put the handset down and stepped back into the kitchen. ‘Brigadier, it’s for you. I had the liberty of having your emergency line patched through here.’

The Brigadier’s eyes widened in surprise – he had no idea when the Doctor might have made such an arrangement – but then quickly rose to his feet and strode past the Doctor into the hallway and the waiting phone. ‘Lethbridge-Stewart.’ He listened calmly to the crackly voice at the other end of the line. ‘Very well. Have Traps One and Two recalled and put the men on standby. Myself and the Doctor will proceed

directly to the rendezvous point.’

He placed the handset into its cradle and turned on his heel, body language and posture changing as the professional soldier took over 9

once more. He found the Doctor leaning casually against the

doorframe, hands in pockets, an expectant smile playing at the corners of his lips.

‘Trouble, Brigadier?’

‘A shower of meteorites has made planetfall in the countryside just outside Bath. Shortly after, the nearest village appears to have

completely disappeared off the face of the Earth.’

‘Like it never existed?’

‘Yes,’ affirmed the Brigadier. ‘Exactly.’

‘Well, what are we waiting for? It seems we may have a Christmas

invasion on our hands!'

The Doctor retrieved his cloak from the line of hooks on the wall and fastened it round his neck with familiar flamboyance.

'Thank you, Doctor,' the Brigadier suddenly said.

'Whatever for?'

'For dinner, I suppose.'

The Doctor grinned. 'Brigadier, the pleasure was all mine. What are faithful friends for?'

The Brigadier grabbed his own coat 'And next year, Doctor, you're coming to mine for Christmas.'

'My dear chap,' smiled the Doctor, clapping the Brigadier on the

back. 'I'd be delighted! Now, shall we?'

As one, the two old friends turned to the door, ready to face once more the dangers the universe had to throw at them.

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But Once a Year

Colin Harvey

An Adventure of the Seventh Doctor, with Ace

As I watch the snowflakes chase hither and yon, I confess I have never before recounted the events of that particular Christmas Eve. I own that this admission may well surprise you, especially when I relate the substance of my fantastical tale. It is altogether likely you will wonder how I have kept such a story to myself when so many opportunities for its dissemination must have presented themselves over the intervening years. But I ask you to remember who I am, and the reputation I have wrought, despite the plague of ill health.

You will be aware that, in defiance of my infirmity, I have applied myself consistently and rigorously to the task of following in my beloved grandfather's prodigious footsteps. Despite the augurs, I have indeed become a respected man of science. Without fear of

contradiction I can say that most, if not all, of my peers demand a

degree of logical, measured temperance in relation to discussions of the material world. They are consequently ill at ease with stories that do not fit such a rationalist conception, so you will appreciate my

reluctance at articulating a story my esteemed colleagues might

construe as frivolous.

You will no doubt be wondering, therefore, why I should choose to relate my story at this precise juncture. It is quite simply that the illness that has been my constant companion has finally, this Yuletide Eve, declared its hand. No matter. I have led a long, eventful life, much, much longer than my wildest imaginings could have anticipated. It is surely fitting that tonight, of all nights, I should finally recall the happenings of almost seven decades previous, when I was naught but a child. I would venture it is the strangest story a man could expect to encounter in a lifetime, and every word of the tale possesses its own veracity.

In the middle years of the preceding century my grandfather, John Kenneth Merrison, had obtained for himself a certain renown amongst 11

his peers and a certain notoriety amongst the gentlemen of the press.

Fame, in common with other elemental forces, is not a consistent

phenomenon, and today few, if any, of my peers have heard of him, though they may recognise not name in his stead.

In his later years my grandfather's interest and knowledge of the natural sciences had led to him being invited to join the eminent naturalist Augustus Glavin aboard the *HMS Rochester*. They adventured much in the South Sea Isles and, though my grandfather's celebrity never matched that of Mr Glavin himself, John Kenneth's observations were such that he provoked heated debate amongst

scientist and clergyman alike.

My grandfather was first and foremost a collector. It is ironic that, though my grandfather travelled to numerous foreign climes, the origin of the vast majority of his extensive fossil collection was altogether less exotic. Indeed, most of his finds were carefully extracted from the seaside at Lyme, and it was on these many trips to the Dorset coast that my grandfather and I cemented our relationship. It was also during these trips that my own enduring fascination with

such relics was born and, during the remainder of my grandfather's lifetime at least,

nurtured.

Eventually the scale of my grandfather's collection had become such that he saw the necessity of constructing a further wing on the house he had himself inherited from his father and which, by rams, would pass to my father. My grandfather's one failing was undoubtedly his

inability to discriminate on grounds of uniqueness and commonality, and so every discovery was allowed access to the collection,

irrespective of merit: it is truly no wonder that the construction of an entire new wing upon an already expansive building was perceived as essential.

As a sickly child, the streets of industrial London were viewed as lethal to my fragile disposition and I was prohibited from exploring them. Indeed, I spent generous periods of time in my wooden

wheelchair, and were it not for the protestations of my grandfather would probably have been confined to bed full time. My parents

grudgingly allowed me to visit Lyme precisely because my grandfather was able to supply his own physician to vouchsafe such sojourns as anodyne at worst and curative at best.

I so relished that time with my grandfather. He was an agile

gentleman even at the grand old age of eighty years, and would skip nimbly from rock to rock in search of likely specimens for his

collection. To any onlooker such liveliness in one so elderly must have seemed stark contrast to the emaciated child in the wooden wheelchair, 12

a tartan rug wrapped securely around my legs, my skin as white as the spume of the crashing waves. But every time my grandfather located an interesting specimen – of which there were many – he would

negotiate his exuberant path back to me so that I might inspect his find and offer my own insights.

So it was that when my grandfather finally and unexpectedly passed away, my world, both intellectual and physical, became altogether

contained. My parents saw this as an apt opportunity to restore their own control over my destiny, and I was banished to bed, save for

mealtimes and morning constitutionals.

These perambulations remained one of the few means by which I

might exercise agency over my own affairs. Fortunately for me, my father, a wholly indolent man, saw selling grandfather's fossil

collection as requiring a good deal of exertion and little in the way of recompense. Accompanied by my nanny, Lucy, I would request that

each morning I be walked through the extent of the gallery, and be allowed to gaze again upon the many strange and extraordinary things he – and later we – had collected.

On some notable occasions, if I could evade the wanderings of my

family and the downstairs staff I would slip out of bed and sit for hours in the shadow, staring at the trilobites and mammoth teeth, my pasty face reflected in the darkness of the glass cabinets.

I see the snow is getting heavier. The falls were heavy that Christmas too, when my story is set. It is still a matter of astonishment that I should be here and have witnessed so many Christmases since that time. I had, for reasons which I will adumbrate in due course, good reason to believe that would be by my last Yuletide in this mortal realm.

I'd awoken early Christmas Eve, but known better than to ring for Lucy. Instead, I'd dragged myself from my bed and pulled the heavy curtains as wide as my limited strength would allow. I had to nib the condensation from the window to see the vista of white in all its detail, deep and crisp and even. Flakes still fell, intermittently but in great waves, from the waxen sky.

How long I sat upon the window ledge entranced by the spectacle, I do not know. When Lucy found me, I was lying in a heap, shivering beneath the window, barely conscious. She immediately scooped my

prostrate body into bed. My parents were furious that I should have disobeyed their strict instructions. Ironically, the severity of my condition meant that Lucy received the opprobrium that by rights

should have been mine and mine alone.

Breakfast was understandably a muted affair, despite the sounds of 13

carolling, and the cries of boys engaged in snowbound horseplay. My father bristled behind an elderly copy of *The Times*, since the snowdrifts had rendered fresh newspapers a rarity. Mother busied

herself with needlework. Occasionally my parents would bestow

disapproving glances, as I sat, head bowed, disconsolately prodding a plateful of kedgeree with my silver spoon.

The remainder of this particular Christmas Eve played out in a

fashion, which, since the death of my grandfather and subsequent

tragic events, had become the norm. My parents had allowed Lucy to acquire and decorate a Christmas tree, purely for my benefit, but neither my father nor Mother were themselves inclined to play any part in adorning the tree with paper chains and other garlands. In sharp contrast with the past, Christmas, for the Merrisons, was far from a merry occasion.

I spent the remainder of the day ensconced in bed, with only the two kittens for company and occasional visits from Lucy, bearing gifts of crumpets and sweet tea. Circumstance meant that I had become adept at employing my imagination to exploit my isolation. I created

mountain ridges and valleys for my tin soldiers to fight in, I retold Biblical tales using an array of wooden puppets inherited from my much-missed older brother, and I read – and I feel largely understood –

my grandfather's papers. Were it not for the fact that it was Christmas Eve, the day would have been much like any other.

Supper was carried out with the same efficient disinterest that had characterised breakfast, elevenses, lunch, high tea and dinner. Lucy brought me forth to dutifully kiss Mother and Father good night. My father mussed my hair distractedly, by evening's fall intent on his Wisden and his pipe. Mother smiled benignly. This night, unlike any other, I was moved to turn to my parents and declare my love for them.

My father stirred amidst the blue smoke and harrumphed an

appreciative noise; my mother issued another pleasant smile before

returning to her needlework. On my way out of the parlour, Lucy

steered me past the roaring log fire, and I watched the flames licking at the base of the chimney. I wished with all my might that the fire be left to roar all night and through to morning, but I knew that it could not be.

Lucy tucked me beneath the eiderdown and I stared up at her plump, rosy face, her hair wound into its usual fastidious bun. ‘Merry

Christmas, Lucy,’ I told her, with impassioned emphasis. She smiled painfully down at me, and placed an affectionate hand on my heart.

‘They won’t take no child as ill as you, Master David, you can be sure of that,’ she had said, by way of reassurance.

My large eyes gazed back at her, and I managed a tremulous,

unconvincing smile. With that she kissed me on the forehead and,

lifting her lamp, took her leave.

I knew that all across the city of London, and all across the country of England, small children would be ensconced in bed, eyes wide,

awaiting the sound of sleigh bells. I knew too that by midnight all of these small children would have fallen into a deep slumber, only to rouse the following morning to discover what wonders the night had bequeathed them.

Sleep did not come to me, for I would not let it. Instead, I lay

blinking in the darkness, as I heard first Mother and then Father retire for the night, their hard footsteps clacking across the wooden floors into their respective, far-flung boudoirs.

I waited for the familiar noises, the ones I had heard every Christmas Eve for the past three years: the noise of sleigh bells, the sound of coal dust showering into the hearth; the scritching and the scratching and the clambering and the creaking.

Christmases when I was a very small child had been glorious affairs.

My grandfather’s youthful glee was given full rein during the festive period, and he would not stand either my father’s sloth or my

mother's prickliness, drawing all and sundry into games and stories and musical improvisations. And come Christmas Eve he would pretend to be Saint Nicholas himself, and we children would pretend we did not know it was him.

We children.

I thought of my brothers and my sister as I lay, waiting for the sound of sleigh bells. I thought about them as I waited for the scritching and the scratching and the clambering and the creaking. I thought about them as I waited for the creature to take me away, just as it had taken them away. But the sound I eventually heard was not the noise I had expected, though it would prove to be just as fantastical. During his travels overseas my grandfather had once recounted to me the terrific roar of a walrus, and to my mind this is what the noise most resembled: that my parents did not hear spoke volumes for the scale of our town house, and the geography of their bedrooms in relation to mine. I pulled myself from my bed and made my way, inch by shaking inch, to my wheelchair.

Upon my approach to the parlour, I heard a young lady's voice.

'Blimey, Professor, the whole place looks like a Christmas card,' she was saying. 'Tree's a bit lame, but look at the snow. They've got everything but the –'

I pushed the door open, and caught my breath.

'Jingle bells,' said an eccentric gentleman, doffing his hat and

smiling winningly. 'I am the Doctor and this is my good friend and 15

companion, Ace. And who might you be, young man?'

'Master David Merrison,' I said woodenly.

'Hey, Dave,' said the young lady, in a rueful fashion hardly befitting her station. 'If you were expecting Father Christmas he'll be along in a minute...'

'Ten minutes,' corrected the Doctor, pulling a fob watch from within his waistcoat, and casting his eye to the antique timepiece atop the mantelpiece, evidently to make doubly certain. 'Not that he was

expecting Father Christmas,' he added rapidly, his eyes narrowing.

‘Were you, David?’

‘I can ring for attention,’ I began, but the girl had grabbed my hand.

‘We can help you,’ she said. Her gaze was steadfast and unwavering, her grip absolute. But her voice was gentle. ‘Tell us,’ she said.

My eyes alighted, with incredulity, upon the sight of a large blue construct in the corner of the room, beside the Christmas tree. I saw the distinctive phrase ‘police box’ and let it assuage my consternation.

I told the Doctor and Ace about that first Christmas Eve when

everything changed, the first without my grandfather. I heard sleigh bells that night, and I thought either that St Nicholas had come to speak with me, or better still that grandfather had been allowed a temporary return to the land of mortals. Indeed, I think all four of us children thought the same, when coal dust started to issue from the chimney, and we heard the scritching and the scratching and the clambering and the creaking down the chimney stack. Steven, the eldest, had rushed first to the parlour, barking instructions for the two middle children to hoist me between them lest I should miss the arrival of our unexpected guest.

By the time my brother and sister had dragged me to the parlour we saw only the boots of the figure ascending the chimney, and the bottom of a writhing brown sack disappearing from view. We could hear

Steven’s voice emanating from the sack, and my two siblings let me collapse into a heap in order that they might grab hold ofhim lest he vanish completely, but too late! Steven cried out in increasingly muffled fashion all the way to the top of the chimney, until finally it ceased completely, along with the scritching and the scratching and the clambering and the creaking. Sleighs bells rang out, then diminished and finally dissipated. Only the shower of coal dust remained to

indicate anything had been awry.

My hysterical siblings brought Mother and Father to the scene of

Steven’s disappearance, and the servants were summoned upstairs to participate in a search, first of the house, then of the grounds, and then of the snowbound square. The Peelers were called upon, and then the magistrate, but no sign could be found of my missing brother, nor

kidnapper. Neighbours joined the hunt through the treacherous streets of Camden, and then Islington, until eventually young and old, rich man and beggar, had joined the quest for the stolen child.

The Yuletide festivities transformed into the New Year, but still Steven did not return, and eventually weeks became months. Our story of St Nicholas coming and stealing our brother became the stuff of scepticism and eventually the stuff of fantasy: I still possess the *Penny Dreadful* essaying the story of the mysterious creature who takes children from their beds at Christmastide.

The following Christmas Eve, the three of us entered a pact intent on catching the figure should he return. But our ambitions were grander still: my second eldest brother, Noel, outlined a grandiose plan of torture, the purpose of which was to establish the whereabouts of our dear, departed Steven. That night, we all three sneaked our way back to the parlour in order that we might catch the intruder unawares. Each of us clutched an item we believed would render us inviolable to attack and the intruder insensible: Noel had purloined a poker, my sister Elizabeth clutched a porcelain vase, and I clasped my faithful bedpan.

When the sleigh bells began their unvarying rhythm, we had every

one of us fallen deep asleep. I warrant that when the coal dust began to fall, when the scritching and the scratching and the clambering and the creaking dominated the room we were all, every one of us, more awake than we had ever been.

Noel and Elizabeth backed away from the fire place, but in my

enfeebled and petrified condition I was unable to move from my

wheelchair with the required rapidity. We watched as a pair of shiny black boots lowered themselves into the still smouldering remains of the hearth. Where one might have expected scarlet leggings, however, there were black trousers.

Noel had lately studied fencing at prep school, and thrust with his poker like the gallant swordsman he so hoped to become. In the

confusion it seemed that his stab missed its target, however, and he immediately turned to Elizabeth and hollered at her to take me to my room. Elizabeth, a quick-witted creature if ever there was one,

grabbed the wheelchair and propelled it rapidly through the door and down the parquet corridor. I craned my neck in a desperate bid to see, and caught sight of an enormous, gangling figure in black cramming a struggling Noel into his sack.

My mother, already distraught at the loss of her eldest son, withdrew still further at the disappearance of Noel. Neither the explanations of Elizabeth nor myself would convince my parents of the true nature of Noel's vanishing. In time suspicion came to rest on the family retainer, Mr Lobson, who had been employed some sixty years previously by

my late grandfather. A heartbroken Mr Lobson was dismissed without so much as a by-your-leave, and my parents resumed their individual paths in grief. When the third Christmas Eve came, Elizabeth and

myself took to concealment. Elizabeth stole to my bedroom and

together we struggled to push a heavy chest of drawers against the door. We hid beneath the eiderdown, and waited for the now familiar sounds.

Come midnight we heard first the bells, then the dust falling, and the scritching and the scratching and the clambering and the creaking. It was only then that we heard an unfamiliar noise, an addition to the untidy symphony, of the creature slowly and precisely making its way up the parquet floor towards my bedroom. We steadied ourselves for the inevitable crash of the door against the chest of drawers, but no crash came. Instead, as we watched incredulously, an apparition melted through the bedroom door and thence through the chest of drawers.

For the first time we saw the intruder in his gruesome entirety,

though I will own it took some moments to register anything other than the creature's ghoulish white visage and the behemoth's terrible yellow eyes. Elizabeth and myself pulled the eiderdown up to our wide eyes, as though this would somehow protect us from the approaching

creature's dark machinations.

But once the shock of his entrance and the nature of his abominable visage had receded, to my amazement, I recognised his person

immediately: or rather I should say, his occupation. There was no mistaking it: he wore the garb of an undertaker, black save for an off-white shirt. A tailing frock coat hung from his gangling frame, and upon his head rested a top hat, around which was wrapped a black

ribbon.

It was clear that the undertaker who had led the procession that

buried my grandfather had terrified me sufficiently that the image had clung to me in the years since the funeral. As a sensible child I had always told myself that my memory must somehow be playing tricks

with me, and that no single mortal could be as terrifying as that undertaker had been. But here I was confronted with a figure that seemed to have stepped unmediated from my direst recollections of that fateful day.

The creature was bearing down upon us now, and with a tremendous

cry I was aware that Elizabeth had pushed me from the bed and I fell onto the wooden floor with a terrible crash. Unable to right myself, I watched helpless as the figure turned on its heel and left the room, clutching a writhing sack upon his shoulder.

From that Christmas Eve until the following, the burden of guilt

weighed heavy upon my hunched shoulders. Though I was convinced

my parents did not blame me for the loss of their three older offspring, they could hardly be euphoric at being left with the runt of the litter.

Whether they half-hoped whatever it was that had taken my brothers and sister would return to complete the job I cannot comment; but it is true that no protective measures were taken to prevent such a

happenstance occurring again.

And so it was that I finished my tale. And unlike any other adults I had encountered up until that juncture, the Doctor and Ace listened and nodded and seemed to accept the veracity of my account So much so, indeed, that the Doctor had begun to examine the fireplace even before my explanation was complete.

‘Perfectly normal,’ he announced, stepping back, and tapping his

chin with the handle of a fanciful umbrella. Despite this, I still cleaved to my presentiment that this strange man might put value by the

utterances of an 11-year-old invalid.

At that moment, the ornamental clock let sound its familiar, irregular chime of midnight

‘Christmas comes,’ said the Doctor, turning to me.

At that, the sound of sleigh bells began to permeate the cold air of the room. I looked, wide-eyed, to the two arrivals.

‘It’s okay,’ said Ace, stepping in front of me protectively.

Coal dust had begun to shower into the hearth. Inevitably, the

scritching and the scratching and the clambering and the creaking came next, and all three of us were able to trace the figure’s unseen progress down the chimney stack. Two shiny boots, and a pair of black trousers emerged into the fireplace, followed by a gangling torso, a leering face and a black top hat. The creature smiled at me, and began to unfurl its sack.

Ace, meanwhile, had pulled from a curious bag slung over her back a length of wood, which looked to all intents and purposes like my brother Noel’s rounders bat. Before the Doctor could restrain her she had launched herself toward the creature, swinging the bat heartily before her. It sailed harmlessly through the creature, and Ace toppled onto the marble hearth, smacking her head in the process.

The demon had reached me now, and I waited my inevitable capture

and consignment to its sack, closing my eyes in dread. When nothing had happened after a moment, I opened my eyes again and was amazed to see that the creature had stopped directly in front of me. It towered over me and merely gazed down with its pupil-less slits, head cocked thoughtfully on one side. Then it turned, and scooped the prostrate figure of Ace into its sack in my stead, before beginning its ascent back up the chimney.

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I became aware that the Doctor was shouting at the creature.

‘Tell me who you are,’ he was demanding of it ‘Why do you need

these people? Tell me, I can help!' His final cry was a plaintive one directed at the height of the chimney stack, as the sleigh bells

diminished to nothing.

'Why did he not take me?' I asked of the Doctor, blinking.

'Hmmm,' riposted the Doctor, himself bearing over me. Abruptly he crouched so as to be at my height 'You mentioned your grandfather passed away before the creature's first visit. Were you close to him?'

'Absolutely, sir,' I nodded. 'I would to follow in his footsteps, were it not for my enfeebled condition.'

'Good King Wenceslas.' The Doctor smiled, casting a glance at the snow-covered window. 'What did your grandfather do, David?'

'He collected, sir,' I explained. 'Fossils.'

'May I see?'

'Why, yes, sir.'

My grandfather's preference for keeping the door to his collection unlocked continued after his demise, more through customary lack of concern on my father's part than through any desire to maintain the spirit of democratic access to the collection his father had so prized.

So it was that I took my usual path past the rows of glass cabinets, pointing out notable finds to my new friend. We utilised my

wheelchair, so I was able to furnish details regarding each of the exhibits without having to worry about the shallowness of my

breathing; besides, in that moment I felt my grandfather's exuberance filling my veins.

'What's this?' said the Doctor gravely, stopping in front of a

nondescript cabinet. It housed some kind of tusked animal skull, much like a cross between a sabre-toothed tiger and a gorilla.

I recalled my grandfather's copious notes. 'My grandfather was

never able to identify this artefact.'

In a smart move, the Doctor had wheeled my chair to a safe distance.

Then, before I could object, he turned the cabinet over, and it smashed into shards. The skull skittered across the floor.

The Doctor crunched over the fragments of glass and gingerly lifted the skull up so that he might better observe it. A decision made, he grabbed one handle of the wheelchair and adeptly propelled me back through the gallery and out into the adjoining hallway.

'The skull,' I was saying, marshalling my breathing, 'it is somehow connected to the ghost?'

'Ghosts are piffle,' the Doctor scoffed as he strode. 'The skull is an alien artefact. It is still alive, but it has no corporeal form. That's why it uses you.'

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'I don't understand, sir.'

The Doctor continued to speed the chair along the corridor. 'You are a sensitive child, David, with a weak body but a strong mind. The skull feeds off the extremes of your emotional range. You loved Christmas, the decorations, the tree, Father Christmas. And you hated the man who led the funeral procession that buried your grandfather. So the skull built a creature of limited corporeality from those extremes of imagery, and had it do its bidding.'

'But why? What did the creature want?'

'Let's ask it,' said the Doctor simply.

We were back in the parlour now, directly facing the fireplace. Coal dust was falling like snow into the hearth. Then came a scritching and a scratching and a creaking and a clambering, and to my palpitating horror, the apparition had reappeared.

The leer had gone, however, and the creature's expression was

altogether mournful, pleading.

The Doctor lifted the skull aloft. 'Is this what you want?'

With a tiny incline of its head, the creature signified in the

affirmative. 'Bring them back,' commanded the Doctor.

As the creature neared the Doctor its face began to corrupt into the

familiar leer, and then to bear a set of terrifying fangs. With that, the Doctor threw the skull against the mantelpiece, shattering it into myriad fragments. The creature let out a silent scream, and then

dispersed like so much dust. All that remained was the creature's sack, which lay flattened on the floor.

There was a sudden rummaging, and the sack seemed to come to

life. I looked wild-eyed to the Doctor, but he did not seem concerned.

In a moment a soot-covered Ace had appeared, clambering from the

depths of the sack.

'Hello, Professor,' she said.

The Doctor smiled broadly at her, but said nothing.

In a further moment, a similarly dust-covered Elizabeth, and then a blackened Noel and Steven had also emerged from the sack.

'It's like a corridor, Doctor,' said Ace admiringly, gazing at the sack.

'Dead clever.'

The Doctor said quietly, 'A portal to a different dimension, I

shouldn't wonder.'

My siblings gathered excitedly around me.

'We were taken far away,' explained Elizabeth breathlessly. 'To a world made of silver.'

'You were taken to the creature's vessel,' corrected the Doctor

gently. He prodded the flattened sack with the tip of his umbrella, 'And judging by the range of this portal you weren't taken far at all.' He 21

glanced about himself. 'The ship most be hidden in precisely the same space as this house.'

'But in a different dimension,' said Ace, with a broad grin.

'Exactly,' mused the Doctor. 'Slightly to the side of this reality.'

‘It made us work,’ said Steven, addressing himself to the Doctor, recognising him as the authority in the room. ‘We were slaves of the creature.’

‘When I arrived they were fixing some sort of machine,’ intervened Ace. ‘Mega high-tech.’

The Doctor nodded slowly, ‘Presumably a machine that could

restore the skull’s corporeality for good, so it didn’t have to rely on...’

His eyes played on me in my wheelchair, and he abruptly finished:

‘Good King Wenceslas.’

Ace interrupted. ‘It’s snowing again,’ she said excitedly. ‘Wicked!’

The Doctor straightened and looked upon us benignly. ‘You children should be in bed. It’s Christmas Day.’ And with that he scooped up the sack and disappeared into the blue box.

Ace mussed my hair affectionately. ‘Merry Christmas,’ she said

smilingly, and headed after the Doctor.

If the night had brought me many fantastical presents, then it still had one gift left. In a moment the blue box seemed once to vanish, to fleetingly reappear, and then again to vanish, and in a roar of wind it melted from this world as surely as the snow come spring.

The Merrisons became a family again, with all the extremes of emotion that entails. But I never forgot the strange man and our conversation about Good King Wenceslas. My health rallied in time, at least to the extent that I became able to stand fast in defence of my wishes, and I became the man I wanted to be. I may have collected fossils, but like my grandfather ahead of me, I made sure never to become one.

And that is that. The irregular chiming of the clock heralds another Christmas Day, a time of giving and receiving, not taking. But I dare say you will forgive me, I think, if I take my leave of you.

God rest this merry gentleman.

Everything

Dan Abnett

An Adventure of the Eighth Doctor

Whitehall, 24 December 1966

For 75 minutes she deftly avoided the doorman's calls coming in via the switchboard. There was, as usual, far too much work to do, and most of it was onerous filing, as dismal as the persistent December rain outside. Though the Home Secretary had worked on for several days after the start of the Commons holiday, papers and correspondence had still piled up. She'd sent him home to Clowdon that morning, in the ministerial Rover. She had assured him that she would finish up behind him. It was simply clerical business.

There was no one left in the office except her. All the juniors and typists had gone home. Single-handedly, she faced the usual holiday overspill. It was the same every year, and it had been the same every year since she'd started her job, 16 years earlier. As Clive Reeves, now Sir Clive, had triumphantly scaled the Whitehall ladder, she'd followed on behind, tidying up after him. A Home Secretary received more

Christmas cards than a junior minister, and the nature of the briefs and portfolios were of a higher clearance, but the essence of her job had never changed: tidying up after him, filing away the paper trail, setting his order of business for the January session.

She'd been careful to send his cards out on the fifteenth, so that even airmail would arrive in time. Now she checked the incoming cards off against her list, and sent out polite returns to those who'd been inadvertently left off: the boss of an engineering firm in the north west who had given a weighty sum to charity; a minor pop star; the Swedish ambassador (how had she overlooked that? A dreadful oversight!).

There were gifts too, most of them brought to the office by leather-clad motorcycle couriers who smelled of wet exhaust fumes. Chocolates, a silk tie, several bottles of good Scotch. She prepared simple

handwritten thank yous on embossed Home Office stationery.

All the while, she thought of the gift, discovered in its plain paper wrapper in her in tray. How unfortunate. How awkward. She would be obliged to acknowledge it, but said acknowledgement would have to be deft. Sixteen years. He had to rock the bloody boat after oh years.

She would, of course, be thoroughly precise. She was very good at that. The right word, a nod at the appropriate moment, that would suffice. Just enough to remind him of their relative positions and responsibilities.

The view from her office window was as grey and wet as a Giles

cartoon. Raindrops flecked the panes. Outside, the Christmas

illuminations of Whitehall seemed spare and cheap. Taxis prowled by, beetle-black and shiny in the rain. Another hour, maybe three, and she would be out there too, in her car, heading towards her mews flat and her own version of a holiday.

The office reeked of stale pipe tobacco. The Home Secretary did

enjoy his St Bruno rough cut. He would pace while dictating

correspondence, tapping the bowl of his thoroughly modem straight-stemmed pipe.

The clock ticked. A pot of shaved-down shorthand pencils stood

beside the phone.

The light on the phone winked urgently.

She sighed, relented, and lifted the receiver, putting the latest sheaf of papers and cards down on her blotter.

‘Home Office,’ she said. As she spoke, she regarded the most

recently arrived gift: a bottle of good Burgundy, courtesy of a wide boy magnate of the North Sea oilfields.

‘Sorry to keep bothering you, mum,’ said the voice at the She end.

‘It’s this fellow at the south entrance. He just won’t go away. I told him we was closed and all.’

‘Dickerson, isn’t it?’ she asked.

‘Yes, mum.’

I’m not your mum, she thought, *even if your accent turns ma’am into mum. At least do me the favour of referring to me as miss.*

‘Did you tell him that the office was closed for the period?’

‘Yes, mum. He’s jolly insistent.’

Cradling the phone under her left ear, she opened another card. The Minister for Agriculture and Fisheries. That was an oversight she’d have to urgently correct with a courier bike. She reached for the stack of blank cards.

‘Does he have credentials?’ she asked, lifting her fountain pen out of its well.

‘Yes, mum. UNIT credentials. I dunno what UNIT is, to be fair.’

She did. She frowned.

‘I suppose you should let him up, Dickerson,’ she said.

‘I did, mum,’ said the voice.

‘He did,’ said the man stepping into her office. He smiled at her. He was rather handsome in a boyish way. There was something a little Byronic about his tailored dark suit and shock of dark hair, his high forehead and his bright eyes. He looked rather fine, like a fifth Beatle who had ignored the moptop rule.

‘I’m so sorry to barge in like this,’ the man said.

‘I’ve got it, Dickerson, thank you,’ she said into the receiver, and hung up. She looked at the man. He was soaked from the rain. He was making a little damp puddle on the carpet.

‘Seventy-five minutes standing outside,’ he said. ‘You really didn’t want to see me, did you?’

She ignited a professional smile. ‘You most realise the Home Office is closed. I don’t believe I can help you. Your clearance was from UNIT?’

The man nodded. He showed her a surprisingly old and shabby

badge in an old and shabby wallet.

‘I wouldn’t bother you if it wasn’t important,’ he said.

‘I’m sure you wouldn’t. I do have a home to go to,’ she replied.

‘Of course you do. 77A Carlton Mews.’

She hesitated, and discretely pushed the button of the silent alarm under her desk.

‘How do you know where I live?’ she asked.

‘You’re Anne Caisson, private assistant to the Home Secretary and –

’ He paused. ‘Oh,’ he said, realisation slowly crossing his face. ‘The fact that I know that must make me sound really dangerous. I’m sorry.

I’m not.’

‘You’re not?’

‘No, no, I’m not. I’m the Doctor.’

He held out his hand. She shook it carefully.

‘I need your help, Anne. I really do.’

‘I see.’

‘Something has come into your possession, and I need it back. I tried to explain this to the doorman at the staff door.’

‘I can’t imagine why he was uncooperative.’

‘I’m serious, Anne. This is quite serious. A small glass object, like an ornament. It would have been sent to you wrapped in plain paper.

It’s really vital that I get it back.’

She narrowed her eyes. ‘like an ornament?’ she asked slowly.

‘Yes, yes. This is rather important, Anne. I mean, Miss Caisson.’

‘I thought it was from him,’ she murmured.

The door behind them burst open and Dickerson entered, along with two burly, uniformed security men.

'Everything all right, mum?' Dickerson asked. The men eyed her

visitor dubiously.

Anne Caisson paused. 'Yes, thank you. False alarm.'

'Very well. Merry Christmas, mum,' Dickerson said as he shuffled

his men out of the office. He paused. 'By the way, mum, this came for you.'

Dickerson collected up a package he'd left sitting outside the door and put it on her desk. She opened it. It was a hamper from Fortnum and Mason. The card read, 'To Anne, for her tireless work. Have a delightful Christmas.' It was signed 'C.R.'

'Thank you,' she said distractedly as Dickerson and the other guards left the room. She looked back up at her visitor.

'Your UNIT credentials. Of course, I can't ignore them. What is this about?'

The fate of your world, I'm afraid,' he said.

'That glass ornament. I thought he'd sent it to me.'

'Who?'

'The Home Secretary.'

She sat down in her chair and stared at the hamper on the desk. 'I'm a silly fool. A silly old fool. It's always a hamper. Absolutely always a hamper. He's married, for God's sake. Two sons. I know he's rather fond of me. Sometimes, you see, he'll say something that's a touch inappropriate. I laugh it off. But I've always been afraid that one day he's going to do something awfully foolish. I should have known him better. It's just that... when the gift arrived on my desk...'

'You thought it was from him?' asked the Doctor.

'Yes.'

'It wasn't. Can I ask... where is it?'

‘I slipped it back into his briefcase just before he left for the holiday.

I thought that would be for the best. I thought, once he found it, he would understand I wasn’t going to play any silly games.’

‘Where does he live?’ asked the Doctor.

She closed the office for the year and signed out. She led the Doctor to her little blue Mini in the Ministry garage. He carried the hamper for her.

‘You won’t make a scene, will you?’ she asked, as she unlocked the car doors.

‘A scene?’

‘At Clowdon, I mean.’

‘Of course not.’

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‘I still don’t know why I’m trusting you.’

‘I know.’

They drove up the ramp into the empty Whitehall streets. Night was coming in, Christmas Eve. Fairy lights and tinsel decorated the trees and the statues.

‘Will you tell me what this is about?’ she asked. ‘Properly, I mean?’

‘Tell me about the Home Secretary,’ he countered.

They drove west, onto the North Circular. The rain increased. The Mini’s wipers beat out a squelching whip-whop noise.

Hesitantly, she told him about Clive Reeves, Sir Clive, the man she had served for 16 years.

‘He’s rather charming. Have you ever met him?’

‘No,’ replied the man in the seat beside her, a dark shadow in the passing streetlights.

‘Very charismatic. I would do anything for him. I do *do* everything for him. But I would never...’

‘I understand.’

‘He has a wife and two sons.’

‘I understand.’

‘I believe he may have had affairs in the past. I remain discreet. I’d hate for Jane to find out.’

‘And he’s fond of you?’ her passenger asked.

‘Yes, he is.’

‘Very much?’

‘I’m not sure I like your implication. You have to understand what it’s like. The relationship between a man like that and his private assistant is, I suppose, like a marriage. It’s extraordinarily intimate.

Ours has lasted 16 years. We know each other so very well, rely upon each other, trust one another completely. But it is absolutely chaste.’

The wipers beat. ‘I think I know how relationships like that work,’

said her passenger.

‘Really?’ She glanced sideways at him briefly. ‘I find that slightly hard to believe. You seem very young.’

The Doctor shrugged and smiled back at her.

Her eyes returned to the road. ‘I say, this is making me rather

uncomfortable,’ she said.

‘I’m sorry.’

‘I want to be clear. He’s probably the best friend I have in the world.

Over the years, we have argued, we have laughed, we have bickered, and we have even flirted, but he has never done anything to

compromise our relationship, nor would I allow him to.’

‘I really do know how relationships like that work,’ he replied.

‘My heart sank when I opened that package and thought it was from him,’ she said, ‘I thought that he had finally forgotten himself and overstepped the mark, and that my world had ended.’

‘The gift wasn’t from him.’

Steering the car through the drizzle, she looked over at the man in the passenger seat. ‘Really, truly?’

‘Really. I promise.’

They pulled up at another set of lights. ‘But you were right about one thing,’ he added.

‘What?’

‘You said when you opened the package you thought your world had

ended. And it nearly has.’

It took another hour to reach Clowdon. The weather was wretched, but at least the roads weren’t busy.

A policeman at the front gate, muffled against the weather in a rain slicker, checked her papers and nodded them through.

‘It’s just a silly thing. Some wretched forms I forgot to get him to sign.’

‘Not to worry, Miss Caisson,’ said the policeman, rain dripping off the end of his nose. ‘I’ll ring the house and let them know you’re on your way.’

She pulled up outside the house. Seen through the dark and the rain, the windows of Clowdon glowed with a golden, inviting promise.

She unclasped her safety belt, hung it on the doorpost hook, and

looked at her companion.

‘I want to know what it is,’ she said.

‘You wouldn’t understand, Miss Caisson. Let’s just get it back.’

‘I’m the personal assistant to the Home Secretary of the United

Kingdom. I get to see all sorts of things. I think I’m tough enough.’

The Doctor nodded. ‘Perhaps you are. Understand, then, that what

I’m about to tell you is bound by United Nations security, and will change the way you view your world for ever.’

‘I’m ready,’ she said, steeling herself.

He looked across at her steadily and calmly. He was very good-

looking, very reassuring. Rain streamed down the Mini’s windows, and made odd, blurry shadows tremble inside the twilight of the car.

‘It’s a device,’ he said quietly. ‘A device of non-terrestrial

provenance. Do you understand what that means?’

‘Of course!’ she snapped. Then she pulled up short and her voice

dropped away to nothing. ‘Oh, God. Really?’

He nodded. ‘You don’t need to know what it’s called, or where it’s from, or how it works, you just need to know what it does. And that’s

hard enough to explain, because it will sound like... sheer fancy.’

‘Go on, please.’

‘It’s extraordinarily powerful. It was sent to Earth by a benign

species with the intention of helping the human race. It... well, it grants the owner’s wishes. It could, for example, wipe out child poverty, remediate world hunger, cure cancer, neuter all nuclear weapons...’

‘Just like that?’

‘Faster than just like that. But it must never fall into human hands.’

‘Why not?’ she asked.

‘Because humans wish for too much,’ he replied. ‘It’s a gift that would go wrong. Even a fine and worthy man like your Home

Secretary would be corrupted by its power. You said yourself he’s not beyond temptation. No one is. The human race is not ready for a gift like this. It has to be returned.’

‘Because it’s the wrong size?’

He smiled. ‘It’s far too big to fit.’

Sir Clive opened the front door himself. ‘Anne! The gate rang

through that you were here!’

‘I’m so sorry to bother you at home,’ she said. ‘I’m an idiot. I left some papers in your case this morning, not realising they had to go out tonight.’

‘You came up all this way in the rain?’

‘They do have to go out, Home Secretary.’

‘Well, come in and fetch them if you must! My case is in my study.

Go right on through and help yourself.’

‘I’ll only be a second,’ she said.

Anne hurried away down the broad, well-lit hall. The Home

Secretary closed the door and turned to the Doctor. ‘We haven’t been introduced. I’m Clive Reeves.’

The Doctor shook his hand. ‘A pleasure,’ he said. He could smell

mulled wine, and pine needles, and feel the wafting heat of a log fire in the drawing room.

‘You are?’

‘Sorry, an old friend of Anne’s from home.’

‘Jolly good!’ said Sir Clive. ‘Jane’s just overseeing supper. Will you stay?’

‘We couldn’t. She has to get back.’

‘That’s Anne. So diligent. A glass of something, then?’

‘Well…’

‘I insist!’

He led the Doctor into the drawing room. Two young boys were

playing Monopoly on the carpet under a huge, glittering tree.

‘It’s your go, Daddy!’ one cried.

‘Johnny’s just landed on Regent Street and he owes you rent!’ the other called out.

‘Just a minute, lads,’ said Sir Clive, pouring two snifters of good brandy. He handed one to the Doctor.

‘Cheers, and merry Christmas,’ he said. He dropped his voice to a confidential murmur. ‘Listen, old man, I’m jolly glad to see that Anne has... well, some social contacts, I suppose. Each year I try to get her to come up here for the season. We’ve plenty of room, but she always refuses. I can’t bear the thought of her being on her own over

Christmas, every year, in that little mews flat of hers. She strikes one as so solitary, and so private. It’s a huge relief to finally discover that she has friends to spend her Christmas with.’

The Doctor smiled. ‘She’s a good person.’

‘Absolutely the very best sort,’ Sir Clive agreed.

Anne appeared in the doorway. ‘All set,’ she smiled, patting her

handbag.

‘Anne, have a drink,’ said Sir Clive.

Anne tutted. ‘I’m driving, Home Secretary. What would that look

like in the papers? Besides, this stuff has got to go off. Say hello to Jane for me and have a jolly good Christmas.’

‘I could call her,’ offered Sir Clive. ‘She’ll hate to have missed you.’

‘We really mustn’t disturb you any longer,’ said the Doctor.

They drove back through the night rain into London.

‘It’s in my bag,’ she said. ‘Do whatever it is you need to do with it.’

The Doctor reached over into the darkness of the Mini’s rear seat.

He found the bag by touch, opened it, and took out the small, heavy parcel wrapped in paper. He felt it tingle against his palm.

'That must have been hard for you,' he said, slipping the device into his coat pocket.

'The matter of a moment,' she demurred.

'I mean going there. To his house, seeing it like that, warm and cosy.

Happy family life.'

'His family life.'

'It might have been yours.'

She laughed. 'Oh, no! I'm not the kind of woman Clive Manning

Reeves would ever have married! Did you suppose I suffered some

kind of pang of envy or regret going in there?'

'Didn't you?'

'Not at all. He has a life, a good life, and it makes him happy. It's not a life that I'd have ever known, even if I'd been less scrupulous about my professional attachments.'

The Doctor nodded. 'So, what's your Christmas going to be like?'

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Anne concentrated on her driving. The road ahead was a black wash of spray. 'Splendid and relaxed and by myself, in my flat. A glass or more of sherry. A mince pie or three from his hamper. Something

amusing on the television – Ken Dodd. *The Black and White Minstrel Show*, perhaps.'

'I think you sometimes wish that you had someone to share it with, the way he does,' said the Doctor.

'Oh, do be quiet!'

'I think you do.'

'And what if I do? Suppose I am boiling with resentment at a life half-

done and mostly wasted? I'm not a fool. I committed my life to Whitehall and Sir Clive years ago. I've no space or time for a partner.

I... I suppose I'm flattered that a man like Clive might find me

interesting, but I won't ever be a bit on the side. I'm perfectly happy with my life.'

The Doctor fixed her with a beaming grin. 'And so you should be.'

The flat was cold. She turned on the lights, and switched on the gas fire.

'Where should I put this?' he asked.

'On the table there. Thank you so much for carrying it up.'

The Doctor smiled. He put the hamper down on the table as she had indicated. The dry warmth of the fire began to creep into the flat. He looked around. The flat was small, and perfectly self-contained. The furniture was well chosen and of good quality. Clowdon had been

grand and inviting, but this was simply comfortable.

'There's tinsel and baubles,' the Doctor said, opening the hamper.

'He always includes stuff like that.'

'Should I put them up?'

'Heavens, no!'

'Why not?'

She came over to join him and looked into the open hamper.

'Because there's sherry, decent stilton, crackers and mince pies.

They're far more important.'

'You pour the sherry and I'll put the tinsel up,' he suggested.

'It actually looks quite festive,' she admitted, holding her glass and leaning back in her armchair.

'It does. It really does,' he agreed.

'In future years, I shall just put the blasted tinsel up and be damned.'

He nodded. ‘Good.’

‘I’m afraid I might have bankrupted you,’ she added.

He took another sip of his sherry and looked down at the board. His
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top hat had just landed on her hotel-heavy Park Lane.

‘Yes, I think you may have done.’ He knocked his metal dog over in an admission of defeat.

‘Can I console you with another mince pie?’ she asked.

The Doctor put his glass down and rose to his feet. ‘I ought to go, I think. It’s very late. It’s tomorrow already, and I have this thing to get rid of.’

‘Thank you for staying,’ she said. ‘I’ve enjoyed your company, and you’ve been a perfect gentleman.’

‘Well, that’s what I am, and that’s what you expect.’ He paused.

‘There was something I nearly asked you, Anne. Not what you think, quite above board. I almost asked you something I’ve asked to only a handful of people before. An invitation to join me in what you would understand as a professional capacity.’

‘Oh?’

‘But I realised you are already in a professional capacity, and that person needs your expert companionship much more than I do.’

‘I’m not looking for employment,’ she said.

And I wasn’t offering it,’ he replied with a grin. He put on his coat ‘I must be going.’

She rose to see him out. ‘Thank you for a lovely Christmas Eve.’

‘I hope we haven’t devoured too much of his hamper,’ he added.

Anne Caisson laughed.

Anyway,’ he said, ‘it’s not Christmas Eve any more. It’s Christmas Day.’

‘You’ll never get home now.’

‘I’m parked nearby.’

‘Then… Merry Christmas.’

‘Merry Christmas.’

‘Doctor?’

He turned in the doorway. ‘Yes, Anne?’

‘One last thing. You never told me. Where did it come from?’

Isle of Mull, 2 December 1966

The sky was cold and bright, as if the light was shining through clear water. He crunched up the shingle beach towards the crofter’s cottage alongside the old man.

‘You saw it, then?’

‘Aye,’ said the old man. ‘Bright as a star at night it were, as it fell down.’

‘And you gathered it up?’

‘In my hands,’ said Jackie McTegh. ‘And I felt it tingle so, like a 32

living thing.’

‘Jackie,’ he said, ‘I’ve been hunting for it, chasing after it. I need you to tell me what you did with it.’

‘Is this some kinda joke?’

‘No, Jackie. I swear it’s not.’

Jackie McTegh shrugged. ‘Well, you see, I felt it and I realised I hadna use for it, so I thought I’d best send it on to someone who could use it wisely.’

‘Like who?’

‘I took it away down the post office, and I sent it off. I’ve seen their kind in the newspapers, the fat cats, the men who have everything. I thought I’d send one of them something they could never expect, for

Christmas. I posted it off to the Home Secretary thinkin' he'd know best what to do.'

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Tell Me You Love Me

Scott Matthewman

An Adventure of the First Doctor, with Ian, Barbara and Susan Sarah Miller had lied to Santa Claus. Well, not exactly lied, the six-year-old told herself: she really did want a new outfit for her teddy, Mr Barnabas, as she had said in the letter that now stood upon the

mantelpiece. But the letter was a forgery. Her mummy had been

watching her, so she couldn't write down what she really wanted for Christmas. It had to be a surprise.

She knew it was a sin to lie. Father Mulligan told her so every

Sunday. But she had talked it over with Mr Barnabas, and he had told her – in his silent way, by letting her kiss the bald spot behind his left ear – that she was doing the right thing. The indoor air-raid shelter that she and Mummy had slept in for so many nights, a sturdy metal table with cage-like mesh sides, gave her a good view of the dying embers in the fireplace. Above it her empty stocking and the forged letter waited for midnight. And she would stay awake, she swore. When Santa came down the chimney, she would call out to him, and in that instant he would know what her real wish was. And he would grant it, for her and for Mummy. And for Mr Barnabas, who also wanted his new outfit but wouldn't mind as long as Sarah's other wish came true.

From under the sheets, she and the bear stared out from their cage into the room, the darkness slowly creeping in as the embers faded in-the hearth. Two pairs of unblinking eyes, shrouded in the shelter, waiting for Father Christmas.

Waiting for him to bring Daddy back from the war.

'Shuffle up, Mabel. You don't half take up some room for a scrawny lass.'

Before Mabel Clutterthorpe had time en respond, she was forced to one side by Edith Brearley's ample hip. 'Steady, Edith,' she said

timidly. ‘You’re crumpling me chains.’

Edith looked at the series of interlinking paper hoops that Mabel was fixing together. ‘What are you doing that for?’

Mabel beamed as she held up part of the paper chain for display.

‘Decorations. I figured if we’re going to be spending Christmas Eve here, we may as well make it a little more festive. You know, for the children.’ Her sunny attitude contrasted with Edith’s scowl. ‘God save us,’ she said under her breath, ‘from Hitler, the ration, and women with a craft.’ Then, more loudly, she instructed Mabel, ‘Look around you, girl. There’s nary a child in this place. Parents have had the good sense to evacuate them, the better sense to go with ‘em, or will be staying at home in their own shelters.’

Mabel said nothing, as she often did after a pronouncement from

Edith. She still hurt from the kick in the stomach she felt after she’d unthinkingly suggested to Edith that she couldn’t understand why any mother could send their child away in the evacuation. The fat, grey-haired woman’s face had grown tighter and sourer than usual, and her grey eyes had gained a fire Mabel rarely saw. ‘Think on, Mabel

Clutterthorpe,’ she had said. ‘Them’s as has no child of their own should just… Well. They should just think on.’

She had no desire to see that look again. So now, Mabel just sat, quietly folding strips into hoops, while Edith fidgeted next her.

Besides, Edith was right: when the Hazel Street shelter had been built 18 months previous, every raid saw it fill to the concrete roof with people. Kids would cram onto the six bunks at the back of the brick building, with the adults taking up every space on the sturdy wooden benches, packing themselves in like sardines.

Even on a cool winter’s night like tonight, the stench of humans

packed like cattle into such close quarters had been unbearable. So it was no surprise that, up and down the surrounding streets, shelters were going up in back gardens and front rooms.

But Mabel preferred the communal shelter. Use had slimmed down

to a few hardy stalwarts such as her and Edith which, despite the discomfort, made sitting out a raid at least tolerable. So it was with not a little dismay that she heard Alfie Wilkinson's voice shout in, 'Any room for four more?'

Not that all of the four squeezing through the small door seemed

happy to find shelter at all. The first of them, a white-haired old man with a slight stoop, was the most vociferous. If it had not been for the taller, younger man with him barring his way, he would clearly have been shooting out back into the darkness again.

A young girl also entered, obviously concerned by the old man's

tetchiness. 'Please, Grandfather,' she begged him. 'You heard what Ian said. It isn't safe out there.'

'Safe? Nonsense, child, what could be safer than returning to the ship?'

The younger man stood his ground. 'Now, Doctor,' he said, his

voice remaining quiet but firm, 'you know we should stay here. It'll only be for a while, I'm sure. Just until the all-clear, and then we can go back to the TARDIS.'

But it was the fourth member of the party who caught Mabel's eye.

She wasn't saying anything, but the woman, about the same age as her male friend, was twitchy, eyes darting around and never settling.

Mabel had seen that look before in a raid. She beckoned to the nervy woman to sit by her, making it Edith's turn this time to shuffle along the makeshift bench. Without exchanging a word, the new visitor set herself to work helping with the paper chains.

Nobody said anything about how much the woman's hands were

shaking.

With Sarah safely tucked in the Morrison shelter in the front room, Julia Miller brought down the bottle of Scotch from the back of the kitchen cabinet. She wiped off the dust that had accumulated over the last m months, inhaling the aroma as she poured herself a glass. It wasn't a tipple she favoured herself, but the smell brought back

memories of her Leslie, relaxing on the sofa after a Christmas meal.

Paper hat on head, glass of whisky in hand, his other arm round her shoulders as they snuggled together after Sarah had been put to bed.

She closed her eyes, and felt his breath on the back of her neck, his lips brushing her skin. Oh, she knew how important it was that he was doing his job for King and country, but she wished to God, for her and for Sarah, that he had been able to come home for Christmas...

The sound of the air-raid siren was fading now. She knew she should join her daughter in the shelter, but told herself she could just take a couple more minutes with her memories. One more sniff of the Scotch, and then she knocked it back, rejoicing in the burning sensation at the back of her throat.

She still had her eyes closed when she heard the tap at the back door.

With a start, she set the glass down and unbolted the door, expecting to see a neighbour caught short in the raid. As she opened it a crack, she felt her breath catch in the warm, still volatile, whisky-soaked place at the back of her mouth. The smile that greeted her was unmistakable.

'Happy Christmas, love,' said her husband. 'Pleased to see me?'

Sarah did not know what time she had dozed off, only that she woke up with a start and it was still dark. She squinted her eyes in the direction of the muffled thump emanating from the fireplace that had woken her.

She whispered to Mr Barnabas to keep still and very quiet Santa

seemed to be taking a while to recover from his journey down the

chimney. She dared not breathe as the shapeless form struggled onto the living room floor, eyes burning with a ferocity that dimmed with each passing second. Sarah gasped audibly as she realised that this couldn't possibly be Father Christmas. At the sound of her voice, the burning eyes met hers, and melted.

And then he was in the shelter with her. Holding her tight,

whispering words of love into the sleepy girl's ear as she drifted

between joyous awakening and blissful dreams, radiating love towards him as she marvelled at how Santa must have known all along.

‘Happy Christmas, love,’ Sarah’s father whispered into her ear.

‘Daddy’s home, and he’s never going to leave you…’

It was Edith Brearley who, inadvertently, began the sing-along. Her absent-minded rendition of *The Lord is My Shepherd* was meant to be internal, but as usual she had failed to keep her thoughts to herself. As others had joined in, they had moved to Christmas carols, working their way through all of the standards. Chesterton, the young man in the group of strangers, demonstrated a fine bass voice, harmonising effortlessly with those who only knew the melody. In the corner, the Doctor had harrumphed to himself. Only Edith was near enough to him to be able to hear a quiet, lilting baritone as he found himself

compelled to join in.

The young girl, Mabel noticed, was struggling, watching everyone

else’s lips and starting each word just a fraction too late, as if each carol was a new experience for her. Soon, though, she gave up

pretending, and joined her friend Barbara on paper chain duties.

Their conversation was low and muted, almost inaudible beneath the strains of *Silent Night*. However hard Mabel tried, though, she could not help but overhear.

‘Grandfather said that the all-clear should sound soon, Barbara. It’ll be dawn in a few hours, and with a night this clear the sunrise should be spectacular from the top of the hill where the ship landed. And I know tomorrow is a special day here, so you can tell me all about Christmas and the traditions and how they started, it all sounds

fascinating. And, oh, this war! I don’t understand why they don’t teach about it at Coal Hill. Why, it must be the most…’

‘Shut up, shut up!’ screamed Barbara, jumping to her feet. Her fists were clenched so hard that the paper chains were flattened and creased under the pressure. ‘Do you think this is a joke? Some history lesson for a silly little girl who doesn’t know any better? Look around you, Susan. This is real life. And this is death!’

The singing had stopped during the woman’s outburst. Chesterton

came over, anxious to placate his friend. But she was having none of it
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– his presence agitated her even more. Struggling with him as he tried to calm her down, she pushed him away so forcefully that he fell

straight onto Susan, sending the poor girl crashing to the floor with him on top of her.

At Susan's yelp of pain, the Doctor was by her side like a shot. He and Chesterton helped her to her feet, and set her down on a nearby bench. 'There, there, my dear, no bones broken. And as for you,

Barbara –'

But when he turned to confront her, she had gone.

Barbara could barely see where she was going, guided only by the light from the moon and stars. But she didn't care. All that mattered was to be away from everyone. And so she blundered on, tripping over

cobbles and stumbling up kerbsides.

Why couldn't she be at home? Spending Christmas with Mother,

both so alike that each would be impatient with the other by Boxing Day. Every year, she dreaded this time and the memories it brought to the surface, but now she missed it more than ever.

She was lucky it was a clear night, she thought. She could easily have broken her neck on these rough roads if it wasn't for the

moonlight above.

And then she realised where she was. When she was. And suddenly,

the moonlight was the most dangerous thing she could think of

Except for the slow, low hum of aircraft above.

Ian was pacing up and down the confined shelter like an irate lion. The Doctor never took his eyes from him, even as he cradled a frightened and subdued Susan in his arms.

'It's so unlike her,' Ian kept saying. 'All the while I've known her, she's never acted like this. But to say what she said to Susan – what she did.

I... I just can't believe it.'

'Clearly something motivated her,' prompted the Doctor.

'Yes, but what? I mean, she was right as rain in the ship, and we can't have been exploring the streets for more than is minutes before the siren sounded and that warden swept us in here. What could have made her so scared?'

The Doctor said nothing, just quietly staring at Ian as if mentally forcing him to join the dots.

It was Susan who broke the silence. 'She hadn't said a word ever

since we left the TARDIS. It was only when I started talking about the war...'

Ian looked at her, then back to the Doctor, who gave him a slow nod in recognition that he was getting it. 'Oh, my,' he whispered. 'Is that it, 38

do you suppose?'

The Doctor met Ian's eyes, then cast them to the floor. 'We bury all sorts of memories, Chesterton,' he said softly. 'And who is to say how anyone will react when something resurfaces? Unbidden, hmm?'

Mabel had been watching the exchange. Though she could hardly

make out what they were saying, and what little she did hear made even less sense, the way that the old man protectively pulled his granddaughter closer needed no explanation.

Chesterton made for the door to the shelter. 'I should go after her.'

'No!' Mabel said, a little more loudly than anyone expected.

Hesitantly, she continued: 'I... I mean, not during a raid. Alfie Wilkinson's patrolling about. I'm sure he'll find your friend and keep her safe.'

Chesterton nodded glumly, returning to the bench where the old man was calming his granddaughter down. No sooner had he sat down,

though, than he sprang up again. 'This is no good,' he exclaimed. 'I can't just sit around here with Barbara running around in that state!'

As he turned to head towards the door, they all heard it. The slow whine, descending in pitch as it increased in volume. As the bomb landed, everything shook, forcing Chesterton to fly back, landing on the hard floor with an audible crack of bone.

As the shock receded, the girl and the old man scrabbled to their friend's aid, but Chesterton brushed them away, wincing but otherwise unharmed as he sat up.

Nobody dared say anything, the three strangers exchanging a look of concern. Mabel felt for them – she hoped that their friend was safe.

Alfie would have found her, got her into one of the other communal shelters and out of harm's way, she was sure.

That thought resolute in her mind, Mabel returned to her paper

chains. With dismay, she realised that they had broken Chesterton's fall – and, in the process, had been ruined.

Barbara pushed herself up from the prone position the force of the blast had slammed her into. She didn't think any bones were broken, but there was a crashing pain on one temple. Raising a hand to it, she felt warmth and stickiness. Blood.

Suddenly, another hand was on the spot. 'There, there,' a warm,

masculine voice said. 'Had a bit of a nasty knock there, didn't we?'

'I... I think I'm okay,' Barbara muttered. 'But thank you.'

There was something soothing about the way he took a stray lock of hair and hooked it behind her ear. Something familiar. Something...

Barbara gasped as the light from a fire a few streets away illuminated

his face. The warmth of his smile was the most comforting thing she had ever seen, as she felt herself descend into his huge bear hug.

'There, there, my precious child,' he cooed to her as she started sobbing into his military jacket. 'Think I wouldn't recognise you, all grown up? My precious little Baa-lamb. Daddy's got you.'

Gently, he rocked her, his large arms enfolding her, keeping her safe.

Her Daddy, her saviour. She didn't know how, or when, but Barbara

did know one thing. She had not felt more at home in a long, long time.

Sarah took her hands away from her ears. The frightening noise had stopped, but what air there was bore so much dust that she only opened her eyes for a small moment.

She reached out for Mr Barnabas. He would be scared too. Her

fingers found his threadbare arm, but when she tried to pull him nearer he would not move. She felt the debris above him, pinning him down just inches from her own head. It was immovable.

Her sob started as a quiet cry, soon engulfed into a crescendo of pain, hurt and fear. And then she felt her Daddy's arms around her.

'I'm here, my sweet,' he told her. 'Daddy's here to protect you.'

She felt his love wash over her, calming her down, tempering her

pain and confusion with a state of unalloyed bliss. 'There, that's better,' he said as he stroked her hair. 'Now you and I never have to be apart again...'

The sun was rising as the all-clear sounded. Mabel was swept along by the three strangers as they burst out of the shelter into the blossoming sunlight. Chesterton suggested that they split up to look for Barbara, but he looked taken aback when Susan raised her voice to him.

'We should stick together,' she objected. 'You heard what Mabel

said before. She can't have gone far. And I don't want to... Well, we should all be together when we find her.'

Mabel had seen that look in so many people's eyes before, not least her own whenever she let herself look in a mirror. After a raid, with the smell of ash, dust and death in the air, the last thing anybody wanted to do was be on their own.

'You said you had a ship, Doctor,' Mabel piped up. 'Would Barbara have headed toward it? The canal is this way...'

An uneasy look passed between the three travellers but, before any of them could answer, a loud call of 'Ho!' interrupted them. Red face puffing with exertion, Alfie Wilkinson was sprinting towards them.

'It's Gable Street,' he managed to exhale as he paused to catch his

breath. ‘Number one’s gone completely. T’others started falling like dominos. They found old Mrs Pollock in number seven.’

40

‘Young man, was anybody else hurt?’ asked the Doctor.

Alfie nodded, then stopped as if to correct himself. ‘Mrs Miller got out, the Lord knows how, beforehand. But her daughter – we think

she’s still in there, but nobody can hear ’owt.’

The Doctor fair pushed Chesterton and Susan in the direction of

Gable Street. ‘Come on, then, what are we waiting for?’ he heckled.

‘The more hands to help, the sooner we’ll find that poor child! Come on!’

Mabel and Alfie found themselves running after the strangers as they headed towards the carnage. Susan asked about their friend but, if her grandfather answered, his response was lost on the wind. Mabel knew, though, that they were making the right decision to help with poor Sarah Miller first. If Barbara was still out there, she’d be able to look after herself. And if she were – well, if the situation were worse, she didn’t see how anyone would be able to help.

Barbara woke to find her head resting in her father’s lap. He was still gently stroking her hair as he had been when he lulled her to sleep, his silken voice regaling her with the bedtime stories he had told her when she was little.

She sat up, allowing him to gently wipe the sleep from her eyes.

‘There, that’s better,’ he said. ‘Good night’s sleep makes everything all right.’ She smiled weakly, then caught her breath. Ian, Susan and the Doctor! she thought to herself. ‘My – friends,’ she stammered. ‘They’ll be wondering where I’ve got to.’

His smile was warm and soothing. ‘They’ll be fine, little Baa-lamb,’

he told her. ‘I’m here, you’re safe now.’

It was true, Barbara thought to herself, she did feel safe. There was so much love radiating out from him that she could almost wrap herself up in its warmth and settle down forever. It would be so easy to lay her head back in his lap, close her eyes and soak up his adoration.

Easy, but impossible.

She sat up properly, so she could look him straight in the eye. She recognised him so distinctly from the photograph that she had kept with her always – until, at least, she and Ian had so suddenly left home.

'It's hard to feel safe when you're being comforted by an alien,' she told him calmly.

Only the slightest tic in his cheek gave him away. 'That bump on

your head must have been a little bit harder than we thought,' he smiled. 'My clever little girl, always thinking up stories...'

She brought her hand up to his as he stroked her cheek, her pressure firm but not unkind. 'It's not your fault,' she said. 'Maybe a while ago I could have allowed you to fool me. But travelling with the Doctor, 41

I've seen so much – there's a universe of tragedy and beauty out there.

It terrified me at first, but now here, back on Earth, it's like I can see so much further.

'And, believe me, there isn't a cell in my body that doesn't want my father here. It's Christmas, I'm a long way from home and I want my Daddy, I really do. I could even accept that he might recognise me even though I'm over twenty years older than the little girl he should know.

'The thing is, though, you're – I mean, he is – dead. Not just in my time, but here, at this point in the war...' She tailed off for a moment, as old memories dislodged from somewhere deep inside. Her mother

dressing for Christmas in her best dress. Her best black dress. Then an earlier memory, of her last happy Christmas, disturbed by a knock at the door and a telegram... Barbara took a deep breath and shook herself back to the present. 'No matter how much I want you to be him, you can't be. And I can't love you.'

Barbara had tried so hard to be gentle to this strange not-Daddy in front of her. As she had been speaking, she could see him shrink a little, visibly deflating as she tentatively frayed the bond that she felt with him. But it was her final words that had the most dramatic effect.

As she said them, his skin turned an ashen grey, but just as she thought he would collapse, his eyes burned a ferocious red.

He lunged for her, pinning her upper arms to her body. Bringing his face to hers, his mouth opened, revealing teeth that showed that this

'man' was no more human than she was alien.

'Tell me you love me,' he rasped as she struggled to be free. 'Tell me!'

His grip was too much for Barbara. As she desperately tried to break free, she found herself falling backwards, the creature on top of her.

All the while, she heard herself screaming, 'No! No! No!'.

And then her head hit the pavement, and everything went cold.

There was little time to take in the scene of what was left at Gable Street. At one end of the terrace, a fire pump was doing its best to douse the flames at the edge of an enormous crater. Other than the firemen, all the activity was at the other end of the street, at what Mabel identified as number 17. The Millers' home.

The exterior walls of the house were, by some miracle, just about still standing, although they did not look particularly stable. The Doctor, stripped down to his shirt sleeves, started directing volunteers with his cane to find ways of shoring the walls up, while Ian and Susan pitched in with trying to dig a way to the little girl they knew must be inside. Every so often Ian would call out for complete quiet, desperate 42

to hear any sound that would indicate they were not working in vain.

It was in one of those quiet moments that Mabel first heard the wails of Julia Miller. She seemed more of a wreck than the house was. Mabel had to do a double take, though, as she saw who was by her side, in part consoling her while at the same time holding her back from

rushing in there and digging through the nibble with her bare fingers.

'Turned up last night,' a voice in her ear said. Edith Brearley, it seemed, had found herself a ringside seat for the whole show.

Leslie Miller was doing his best to hold his wife as close to him as possible, but he seemed to be increasing his grip on her the more she tried to wrestle free. At first, Julia's protestations were incoherent, but

gradually her cries became louder so that Mabel couldn't help but overhear.

'Don't you care?' she was screaming at him. 'Our daughter is

trapped in there, she could be dead, and all you want to know is if I love you. What on Earth,' she shouted, physically pushing him away on every word, 'do you expect me to say?'

With every shove, Mabel could not believe her eyes: Leslie Miller seemed to visibly weaken, fading into a grey shell of a man, but at the same time, he threw whatever strength he had into holding his wife close to him, however hard she struggled.

Whatever he said in reply to his wife was too quiet for Mabel to

hear, but her reply could never be. 'I don't care! It's your fault that I'm not in there with her, protecting my daughter! Just get away from me!'

And with a final shove, she propelled her husband to the floor.

And then before anybody could react, whatever it was that had been Leslie changed before their eyes. His skin started to glow from within, with a dull light such as one might see when stoking a dying coal fire.

'Tell me you love me,' they heard him hiss. 'You and I, we were meant to be together! Tell me you love me!'

Mabel felt paralysed as this half-man, half – oh, she didn't know what it was, she just felt it was a thing – clawed at Julia Miller, forcing her to the ground. Around her, she could see others standing by, as if they hoped to reconcile what they had just witnessed with something rational before they interfered.

She tore her eyes away briefly, choosing to gaze down Clarendon

Street than stare at what was unfolding in front of her. No one was more amazed than her when slowly, out of the dust clouds, a woman staggered holding a frail, limp body in her arms.

Her call of 'Ian! Doctor! Help me!' drew more people to her.

Instinctively, Mabel went to help Barbara, silently ignoring the

woman's obvious head wounds, instead helping her lay the

unconscious man she was carrying gently down onto the pavement. He 43

was surprisingly light, she noted, and clammy to the touch.

The Doctor hurried over to them, checking the man's neck for any

signs of a pulse. His eyes met Barbara's, giving her a brief shake of the head. Barbara took his cold hand in hers, as if willing the life back into him. 'I'm sorry,' Mabel was sure she heard her say, in a tone that she was not sure was meant wholeheartedly.

It was a while before she noticed that Julia Miller's fighting with her husband had stopped. Looking up, she saw her neighbour push a pale, deflated Leslie Miller off her. While Julia lay, catching her breath, the frail man staggered towards Barbara, pushing her out of the way to cradle the prone man she had carried in his arms. As he stroked his face, Mabel saw that he was sobbing with what seemed to be a mixture of pain, relief – and love. She said nothing as Leslie leant down, planting a kiss on the man's lips. She did her best to shush Edith Brearley, who was beginning to tell anyone in earshot that she had always known.

The man who was not Barbara's father seemed to rouse slightly.

Barbara placed a comforting hand on Leslie's shoulder, prompting him to turn to her. 'It's not enough,' he wept. 'We're dying...'

She hugged him then, and felt him gain a little strength. But like the body that looked so much like her father, he was weak and failing, she knew. As the prone body lay lifeless on the cobbled street, another set of eyes flickered with a once fierce, but dying, red.

'Fascinating,' whispered the Doctor. 'Creatures that have a chemical dependency on endorphins, hmm? I have to say I've never seen

anything like it.'

Barbara recognised the look of confusion on Mabel's face. 'He

means that they feed on emotions, or they die,' she explained gently.

'Only you're wrong,' she instructed the Doctor. 'I think it's only love that they respond to. Any other emotion...' She checked herself before continuing. 'Anything else either weakens them, or quickens their decay.'

There was a coldness in Barbara's voice that Mabel did not, despite her curiosity, want to question.

Leslie's face was ashen now. 'I am – a Banshara. We are –

Bansharai,' he gasped. 'Our ship was hit... we were separated.

Without... each other... had to... had to...'

'You had to find other people to love you,' Barbara finished for him.

The Banshara was too weak now to do anything but nod tentatively.

'So this isn't Leslie Miller?' Mabel asked. The Doctor shook his

head.

'No, it appears that this poor chap can adopt a form that increases his 44

chances of being loved, in an emergency.'

'What can we do, Doctor?' asked Mabel, trying to quell the tears

rising up in her eyes. 'We can't just sit here and watch them die.'

Barbara's face was stem. 'Can't we? They aren't the people we think them to be, these are just forms taken to deceive us.'

Mabel did not, could not, say anything in return: yet, despite not knowing this woman before tonight, she could not believe that Barbara, for all her cold looks towards them, would ultimately allow these two men to die alone in the street.

She looked to the Doctor for an answer, but before he could reply a shout rose up from the ruins of number 17. They looked up to see

Chesterton stumbling out of the rubble, a small girl wrapping herself around his neck. Susan was following behind, carrying a very dusty, extremely unkempt, but otherwise intact teddy bear. As she came over, Barbara caught her eye. Silent apologies were offered by each, and both gave little half-smiles in acceptance of the same.

Julia gave a shriek of relief and ran to collect her daughter. 'Oh, my darling,' she sobbed. 'I thought I'd lost you.'

'You shouldn't have worried, Mummy,' Sarah said matter-of-factly.

‘Santa gave me Daddy for company.’

Julia’s sobs turned to a gasp of horror, as another Leslie Miller, covered in dust but otherwise strong and healthy, stepped down from the nibble that had held him captive. She looked from him, back to the other Leslie Miller lying near death on the pavement.

The stronger Leslie followed her gaze, recognising in a second the two forms before him. In an instant he had run over to them, cradling his two mates in his arms.

As Barbara stepped back from the trio, she swore she could see the life essence flow between the three of them.

Gradually, all three men rose to their feet, their human forms fading away to be replaced by irradiant white forms. ‘Christmas angels,’

whispered Mabel to herself.

The Banshara that had been Barbara’s father turned to the assembled crowds. ‘Thank you,’ he said simply. ‘For a time, I feared that I would never be reunited with my family again. But the three of us are whole again now: and our –’ he emitted a dissonance that sounded like

brother, sister and lover rolled into one ‘– has alerted us, in his health, to the pain we have caused those of your kind.

‘We understand that today is a day for sharing gifts with those you love and so, before we depart, we give you this small token, as a mark of our apology, our gratitude and our love.’

With a wave of his hand, the three glistening forms brightened and 45

coalesced. Within the light, Barbara saw her father – her real father, she knew. By his side, her mother as she had been, happy and smiling, hand in hand as they were on the last time she had seen them together.

Mabel looked into the white light. Her mother was there, with her throaty laugh, bright red lipstick and Aunty Jean wrapping a friendly arm around her waist.

Edith gave out a gasp of joy. ‘My boy,’ she whispered so softly that even Mabel beside her wasn’t quite sure she heard correctly.

Ian did not quite believe what he saw. Was that himself, in a morning

suit? And that woman dressed in white beside him... no, surely that was impossible...

Beside them, Susan gave a gasp. ‘Grandfather,’ she said in disbelief,

‘is that...?’ But the Doctor did not answer, other than to take her hand and squeeze it tightly.

As the huddled masses stood in silence, one of the brightly lit figures broke away and approached Sarah Miller. ‘Thank you,’ he said quietly.

‘You have saved our family.’

‘Are you going away again, Daddy?’ Sarah asked. Tears started to

glisten in the young girl’s eyes. The Banshara who had been her father knelt to her eye level.

‘I am not your father, my little one,’ he said to her gently. ‘We live so far away, were lost and now must go home to our own family. But know this, Sarah Miller,’ he placed a hand gently on her head. ‘Your kind do not see emotions as we do; for us, they have form, shape and light. But I am sure that, wherever he is, your Daddy can see the love you have for him. To us it is blinding; to him, it must appear as a beacon, one that will surely guide him safely home.’

And as Sarah found herself swept up into her tearful mother’s arms, the three Bansharai joined together again. The light grew brighter, more white than anything any of the spectators had ever seen before.

All too soon, the light was gone, and the three figures with it. For a while, all stood quietly, not wanting to break the silence. Then, slowly and noiselessly, the residents began to move together, checking that the Miller women were all right, and looking after each other.

The Doctor felt Chesterton’s hand on his shoulder. ‘Funny, isn’t it, my boy,’ he said quietly, observing those around him. ‘All over the

galaxies, so much hardship is wrought by man upon man. So many

wars, so much pain.

‘But throughout all that, family bonds remain strong. And where

some bonds are lost, others are formed. If one were to believe in such

things, one might almost say it were a miracle.'

And as he watched his granddaughter hug Barbara closely, and as he patted Chesterton's supportive hand, he nodded to himself. Yes,

families were formed in the strangest of ways.

47

The Cutty Wren

Ann Kelly

An Adventure of the Second Doctor, with Jamie and Victoria

Where are you going? says Milder to Maulder

Going to hunt the Cutty Wren, says John the Red Nose

With what will you hunt her? says Milder to Maulder

With guns and with cannon, says John the Red Nose

How will you cut her up? says Milder to Maulder

With hatchets and cleavers, says John the Red Nose

Who'll get the spare ribs? said Milder to Maulder

Give them to the poor, says John the Red Nose

'The Cutty Wren must pass!'

Isiah looked up from the pamphlet he'd been perusing – *Middleton Old Glory Morrismen, Cutty Wren Outing 1906* – and gave a start.

Grinning at him was a fellow in top hat and tails, face blackened with burnt cork, a gowned figure on his arm.

'Middleton's morris master and his Molly at your service, sir. If you'd just step from the way.'

Isiah stepped back, and the pair swept past, the Molly blowing him a sarcastic kiss through 'her' beard.

He stood, jostled by the crowd, as twenty or so black-faced villagers stomped past, green and black ribbons bright against their work

clothes. Marching to the ominous beat of a single drum, they were a grim contrast to the festive village scene around them. Wreaths of holly and ivy adorned the village's houses and cottages, every window

seemed lit with a lamp or candle, and a decorated fir tree stood on the green. Music struck up, a strange wandering tune that wove amongst the drumbeat. The crowd picked it up at once, singing out,

"'Where are you going"? says Milder to Maunder. "Going to hunt

the Cutty Wren!"'

To whoops and yells, the focus of the ceremony came into view – a tangle of branches and ribbons, borne aloft on a pole by the largest man Isiah had seen in Middleton. Two equally sturdy lads flanked him, 48

holding ribbon-twined ropes that trailed from the bundle. On top, Isiah made out a roughly carved house, a doll's home that a carpenter might make from odds and ends. It was uncomfortable to look at – shadows flickered in a way Isiah somehow perceived, but couldn't see. He

turned his head, but the sensation remained.

Behind him, he heard a couple of out-of-towners assure each other that this was the quaintest thing they'd ever seen. Then, in a Suffolk accent, a voice muttered, 'There she is, our wren. I hope she ain't still angry.'

The wren bearers marched off, followed by musicians and a swirling knot of singing villagers. Youths pressed close to grab at the trailing ribbons; swaggering men slapped the house. Each such silly action was applauded, as if attended by real risk. Isiah trailed after, feeling woefully out of place. Apart from one small group, which surprisingly included a Scotsman, the quaintness enthusiasts had quickly had their fill of tradition and retired to the nearby Bell Inn.

The procession seemed to stop at every lighted doorstop, for jigs to be danced and drinks to be drunk. At each halt, the Cutty Wren passed ceremoniously between bearers with much attendant ritual. His fellow non-Middletonians had picked up the idea of the thing, and were

happily joining in. The short shabby man with them had even jumped into one of the dances, to his companions' amusement.

By the time they reached the Bell Inn, Isiah could see the effects of so much liquid generosity on the Middleton troupe's demeanour. It was surprising that country folk were not more inured to the strength of their local ale; but perhaps they seldom had the opportunity to drink this much. The three wren bearers seemed most affected, stumbling and lurching alarmingly. Abruptly, two collapsed almost

simultaneously. Only a quick save by a couple of dancers prevented the country reliquary from crashing down onto the roadway.

'What's wrong?' said someone. 'Are they having a fit?'

The bearers lay, shivering and jerking, on the ground. Concerned

onlookers rushed over to gasp uselessly, and were scared back again by the lads' violent flailing. Isiah thought what he could do to help, and started pushing through, waving his hip flask. 'Excuse me,' he shouted.

'Let me pass.'

'Yes, out of the way,' came another voice, concerned but confident.

'Let's see what's up with these youngsters, shall we?' The down-at-heel jiggist, followed by the Scotsman and a young lady in a neat but dated outfit, barged up to the twitching wren bearers. Making the damage worthy of repair, the third lad swayed and crumpled. The

Scotsman caught him in strong arms.

'Ah, Doctor, where d'you want this great lummox?' he said,

grunting with exertion. Isiah remembered himself, and stepped forward to help and the two of them held on to the spasming body. The young woman dithered beside them.

'Just lay him down next to the others, Jamie, thank you.' The man –

a doctor of medicine, rather than divinity or philosophy, Isiah hoped –

was examining the fitting men, jumping quickly from one to the other, peeling up eyelids, holding wrists and pointing an odd instrument at them and around. He looked up. 'Ah, and just as I was getting the hang of that dance!' He looked sad at this realisation, then his eyes narrowed and darkened imperceptibly. 'I think we need to lay our

hands on

whatever is in that little house up there.'

The Scotsman – Jamie, obviously – looked over at the panicking

crowd now gathered around the garlanded pole. 'That could be a wee bit difficult, Doctor.'

'We'll have to get a look at it. Tell them we're keen bird watchers or something. Whatever's in there, it's stripping metabolic energy from the mitochondria of anyone near it, judging by these fellows here. It's definitely not from Earth.'

Fascinated by this assertion, Isiah blurted out, 'That's astounding!

Because it ought to be a dead wren in there.'

The Doctor shot him a confused look, noticing him properly for the first time. 'Ought it?'

'But it's not, and that's very unusual,' Isiah went on. 'I feel certain it's a meteorite, and I have brought apparatus to study it. I've had equipment brought up, and I motored up from Kent early this morning.

But I was turned down quite boorishly when I asked to see the wren.'

'Well, it would explain a lot if you're right. I'm the Doctor – pleased to meet you.'

'Isiah Saul. Electrical engineer.'

The Doctor smiled and nodded over at the wren's pole. 'Well, Isiah, I think we may have an interest in common.' A conspiratorial note crept into his voice. 'How do you feel about making a grab for the wren?'

The suggestion seemed made almost in a spirit of fun, and Isiah

never found out exactly how the Doctor planned to carry it out, as the bizarre palsy suddenly overcame the remaining dancers. Shrieking

villagers dashed to and fro, and several went down in a melee of

flailing and jerking limbs, knocking the wren's pole in the process. The little wooden house split as it smashed onto the ground, and a small black sphere shot out and rolled towards him.

Quickly, amidst the distraction, Isiah bent down and slipped it into his pocket. The Doctor gave him an approving grin. ‘Well fielded!

Your equipment is nearby?’

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‘Yes, at Jennings’ stables. Not too far,’ replied Isiah. Should he really have done that? he wondered. But dare he really give it back, to these suspicious villagers, in the middle of all this?

‘Well, I should be absolutely delighted to see your apparatus. Jamie, Victoria, you two will be all right here, won’t you?’ Victoria attempted to speak, but the Doctor carried on talking, not noticing the girl biting her lip petulantly. ‘Try to find out anything you can about this

mysterious wren.’ He gestured at the stricken locals. ‘And look after this lot. They’ll be right as rain once they’ve had their amino-acid balance restored. Understand?’ He turned to follow Isiah.

‘No, Doctor,’ the pair chorused in what sounded like a well-

rehearsed exchange.

The Doctor shouted back, ‘Just take them into the pub, and get them a pint and a pickled egg!’

Ignoring their confusion, he ran after Isiah. ‘Isiah, wait! Could I have a little look at the, er, wren, please? I need to do something to it.’

‘What could you need to do to such a thing?’ Nevertheless, Isiah

withdrew the wren from his pocket. Now he could see it clearly, it resembled a small ball with straight ridges running across it at all angles. It looked burned somehow – its blackness that of a lump of coke or charcoal.

‘Thank you,’ said the Doctor. ‘Not feeling a little strange, at all, are you?’ Isiah realised that, yes, in fact, he was feeling a bit faint. His arm gave a sudden involuntary twitch, almost sending the wren flying.

‘Hang on, hang on...’ The Doctor waved his metal cylinder at the

wren. ‘Better?’

‘Yes,’ said Isiah. ‘Completely. How curious. What is that device

you're holding?'

'Oh,' said the Doctor, frowning down at the cylinder in his hand as if it hadn't been there before. 'Just something I'm breaking in.' He quickly pocketed the device. 'What were you saying about a dead

wren?'

'But surely that's why you came here? Don't you know anything

about the Middleton tradition?'

'Oh, I heard there'd be morris dancers, and, well, I just rather like them. I came on a whim – please, do go on.' The Doctor gave a

pleading smile, and the two men started walking as Isiah began to speak.

'Well, this tradition, the Cutty Wren, although common amongst the Welsh, is found nowhere in England bar Middleton, which is one thing that's unusual about this particular version of it.' Isiah took on a lecturing tone. 'The other, of course, is the wren itself. Everywhere else an actual wren – caught and killed by boys – is used, then buried.

But here they have this... thing. I read an account of it in a local gazetteer, which mentioned not only that the item was in all likelihood a meteorite, but also that it had been observed by reputable men to have lights moving across its surface.' Isiah stopped at a door, and began to unlock it. 'My workshop,' he explained. 'So, I was intrigued as to whether this was some form of electrical phenomenon.'

'Well, Isiah, what you're holding there has certainly come from

beyond the confines of this planet, and I think it's rather dangerous. I should say this "wren" is some sort of automaton that's wound up here by mistake, run out of power, and now is trying to recharge its batteries from whatever source it can find. I've put a stop to that for the moment, but it won't last. I need better tools to get inside it, otherwise it could get rather nasty for anyone who goes near the thing.'

Isiah gaped at him. The man spoke with utter conviction – was he

some sort of crackpot? 'That is... an intriguing theory. I doubt there

are any tools with which my workshop cannot furnish you. However, I am loath to act on such an exotic basis, so if you will excuse me?' He sidled in through the door, ready to close it on this madman.

The Doctor stepped forward, placing a hand against the door. 'Oh, Isiah, come on,' the Doctor spluttered, practically hopping from foot to foot in frustration. 'You felt the way it was affecting you! You're not a close-minded man – give me the benefit of the doubt. Look, you want to examine the wren, I want to get inside it – let me help you do that.'

Something odd had happened to him, that was true. And the wren...

it had looked strange, wrong. If this man did know something about it..

Thoughtful, he stepped aside, and let the Doctor into the converted stables.

'Thank you.' The Doctor strode into the workshop and looked

around. Isiah, noted electrical engineer, owner of numerous patents for the regulation of current and owner of England's first private

electrified house, waited proudly for his reaction. He was most piqued when the Doctor's face fell, registering disappointment at the

equipment arranged on the heavy wooden workbenches. Incandescent

bulbs sprouted from sockets, meters were laid out neatly on benches along with coils of copper wire and boxes of Bakelite switches. A blackboard showed a half-erased electrical layout, a spark gap

generator added exoticism, and a pair of small electric motors

practicality. The whole was webbed together by loops of thick cloth-coated cable that culminated at a forbidding wall of squat grey metal boxes squared up on shelves. The Doctor ambled up to the wall.

'Lead-acid accumulators?'

'Yes. Fully charged at my own house, by the steam generators I

maintain there, and conveyed here so that I might have power with 52

which to properly examine the wren. The array uses my own patent

regulators.' Isiah stressed the 'own' heavily. 'Any, some or all may be discharged as desired.'

'My word! You did come prepared. Could give you quite a jolt,

that!'

Good Lord! Was this man impossible to impress, wondered Isiah?

Still, he was terribly shabby. The harsh are light paid his worn clothes and creased ace no compliments.

'You are, then, a student of electrical science, Doctor...?' A rising note implied a request for some further identification.

'Oh, I keep up with developments,' said the Doctor vaguely. 'Now, I'm sure you're as eager as me to see the inside of the wren?'

Jamie and Victoria sat with the morris troupe by the huge fireplace of the Bell Inn. Questions about the wren had met with short, sullen answers, even after drinks had been supplied. They were the only

outsiders in the stuffy public bar, which was packed with locals going over and over the day's events. Despite the decorative greenery that festooned every nook and cranny, and the warm light cast by candles in yellow glass guards, the atmosphere was far from festive.

Victoria tried again. 'So, you do this every year, do you?'

The morris master gave her a look over the tins of his tankard. 'Aye, miss. Every Boxing Day.'

'And does it go back a long way?'

'Since my great-great-granddad's day. It's tradition.' He glared at her, as if this was somehow her fault.

'You should never have taken her out!'

Jamie turned round, to see a short, drunk, angry man in a ragged fur waistcoat, jabbing his finger at the morris master. 'You should have left her well alone, after what she did to Martin.'

'Go away, John. We got a duty and you known. We got a duty to the wren – h asn't she always done us right before?'

His companions muttered assent.

‘You’re all foots. I’d throw that thing down the privy soon as took at it. Throw it down the privy and hope it shot a spark up your backside.’

This baffling insult delivered, the man turned and left. Jamie and Victoria shared nudges. As soon as they could, they excused

themselves.

John was at the bar. He smelt very bad. Victoria took the direct

approach. ‘What were you saying about the wren, back there?’

The man winked and put his finger to his nose, grinning. Jamie

stepped in. ‘Would you like a drink, mister?’

‘Oh, yes, lad. A pint of the mild. And a brandy.’ Jamie turned away 53

before the list grew.

‘So, what were you talking about?’ persisted Victoria.

‘See this vest?’ said John. ‘Go on. Feel it.’ Dubiously, Victoria touched the straggly hem. ‘Do you know what that is, girly? Badgers.

Caught ’em, skinned ’em myself. What do you think to that, girly?’

‘I think ifs horrid!’ replied Victoria, pulling her hand away. ‘I feel very sorry for the poor badgers.’

John stared at her, then cackled.

‘Heh! You know your own mind, girly. Not like them lot there: He

waved an arm. ‘Just follow, that lot. Fiddling about with that wren, cos it’s what their daddy did. But they got no hold over me. I’m a

woodman, see?’

‘But what did the wren do?’

‘I’ll tell you. last year, fellow called Martin, he gets chosen to give the wren the chop with the hatchet, like they say in the song.’

‘The song?’

‘Weren’t you listening, girly?’ John warbled a line of the folk song.

“‘How will you cut ’er up? With hatchets and cleavers.” So Martin gets to give the wren a whack, get it to give up the feast. You don’t know what I’m talking about, do you girly?’

Victoria shook her head.

‘Well, you gives the wren a whack, and out from her comes the

feast. Don’t look too tasty, like a big... a big puddin’ maybe, but it tastes better than the best meat you ever ate, and the best sweet too.

Thanks, lad.’ Ile took a mouthful of the drink Jamie handed him.

‘And this came from the wren?’ asked Victoria.

‘Just kept on coming, it did. But lately the wren ain’t been so giving and, when Martin hither, she didn’t give nothing. So he hit her again, and she struck him dead. With lightning.’

‘How awful!’

‘And then she flew off. I’d heard folk say they seen her fly before, but I didn’t believe it. But she flies off this time all right, and she sticks herself in a tiny little crack in the wall, and stayed hid there.’

‘Oh! As if the poor thing was scared!’ said Victoria.

Old John laughed. ‘You’re as soft as a brush. Heh, maybe she was.

But she stilt killed a man, and they shouldn’t be carrying bee round.

They’re sheep, scared to do anything different.’ He raised his voice. ‘I told them no good would come of it, and it hasn’t!’ He leaned back against the bar, clearly pleased at being proved right.

‘Oy! Oy!’ The morris master had heard. ‘John, you telling them two our business, you stupid beggar?’

‘I’ll tell who I like what I like, you old fool!’

‘What you been telling that nosey girl?’

‘We’re only flying to help you,’ said Victoria. ‘I’m sure once the Doctor’s had a look at your precious wren, he’ll know what to do:

‘The doctor?’ The morris master looked at Victoria suspiciously.

Jamie threw Victoria a stern look. ‘What did you go and do that for?’

‘What doctor?’ the morris master carried on. ‘That electricals fella who was asking about this morning? He’s your mate, is he?’

Victoria shook her head urgently.

‘He’s got our wren, hasn’t he? Having at look at it, secret like?’

Jamie grabbed Victoria’s hand and pulled her into the saloon bar. As they made for the exit, they could hear the morris master bawling,

‘Lads! Lads! Get yourselves ready!’

‘I’m sorry, Jamie!’ pleaded Victoria, red-faced. ‘We’d better warn the Doctor!’

Aye,’ agreed Jamie as they disappeared out onto the street.

With the Doctor’s help, Isiah soon had the bench grindstone connected up. Wearing thick leather gloves, he was poised to push the wren

against the cutting edge when Jamie and Victoria’s shouts came from outside. The Doctor went to let them in, leaving Isiah contemplating the wren’s smooth, charred-looking skin. A meteorite, he assured

himself. Yes, from beyond this world, but merely an inanimate lump.

Though, if it were an artefact, a craft, imagine the batteries it must use…

‘Bolt the door! Bolt the door! Doctor, whatever you’re doing, you’d better hurry.’ Jamie’s voice was urgent. ‘Those morris men know

you’ve got their birdie, and they’re coming here now.’

The pair breathlessly recounted everything they’d heard in the pub, talking over one another in their haste.

‘But *how* could it give out food?’ Isiah queried.

‘And why would it want to?’ muttered the Doctor, chewing on a

fingernail. ‘But let’s get on. We haven’t much time – are we ready to cut?’

Isiah picked up the wren, with some trepidation. Would he be struck by the lightning? He steeled himself – at least now he'd find out if it did have batteries. The Doctor plugged through the motor, and the grindstone began to spin. There was a screaming note, and dust rose as its edge bit into the black ball.

All at once, the wren's matt skin burst into incandescent life. Tiny points of light dashed across it, forming intricate patterns. Just as quickly, they vanished. Isiah stopped, awed. Then he was struck by a new and terrible idea.

'Doctor!' he shouted, over the racket 'Doctor. This thing... the

wren... I have an awful fear that we are about to harm a living being.'

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'What?' shouted back the Doctor. 'Isiah, we don't have time.'

'Doctor, I am an engineer.' shouted Isiah. 'I understand systems, how they work, the logic that orders their behaviour. They follow patterns. But I can perceive no pattern in the actions of the wren. I perceive a... a personality!'

The Doctor finally pulled the plug. In the quiet, a missile cracked against the stables' wooden shutters. Isiah went on.

'You have planted in my mind the idea that this is from some other world, some other culture. So consider, please, what you would do if stranded upon a savage island, where the inhabitants will not

understand you, despite all your attempts to communicate. Perhaps they threaten what remains of your craft. What can you do to show you mean no harm?' More missiles hit, and now angry voices could be

heard outside, as the villagers neared. The Doctor looked aghast.

'A gift,' he said, half to himself 'It's been giving gifts. If you're right... All its power must have gone to synthesising food. No wonder it's drained dry.'

'Give the wren back,' shouted someone. Fists pounded on the door.

'Could we just give it back?' quavered Victoria hopefully.

'No! Absolutely not!' snapped Isiah. He shuddered, thinking of the entity, the thinking being he imagined animating the wren, trapped

and alone amongst these ignorant bumpkins for... he didn't even know how long.

'No, Victoria,' said the Doctor more gently. 'It would be dooming the wren to a slow death – it could never find enough power here. And it's dangerous for the villagers.'

'But what can we do?' said Isiah. The door was shaking to heavy

thuds now. Jamie put his shoulder to it. 'They'll be in here any moment There has to be something in my workshop that can help it.' He looked up, to see the Doctor gazing appraisingly at the bank of accumulator cells.

'Oh, I think there is.' lie grinned momentarily, a mischievous spark flashing across his eyes. 'Isiah, that regulator of yours – can you use it to route all of your power through one cable? A thick one?' He dashed across the workshop and started rooting around amongst piles of

materials.

'Yes,' replied Isiah, hurrying over to the accumulator bank to make the adjustments. 'Will that be power enough?'

'No, not nearly enough,' the Doctor replied cheerfully. 'But we can boost it up a bit!' He threw copper bars over to Isiah. 'We need all your power, all at once, if we're going to give the wren a late Christmas present.'

Isiah looked at the bars he held in his thick glove, then at the raised

contacts on each accumulator. He winced, then nodded.

'I must short out and destroy my battery. Yes, I see.'

'Will you just hurry up and do it!' shouted Jamie from the juddering door. Victoria had joined him and lent her slight weight to keeping the mob out The Doctor finished winding the wren in a coil, 'Now, Isiah!'

The air crackled, and the scent of ozone filled the air as Isiah

slammed one, then another, then another of the thick metal rods across the rows of contacts. Sparks arced over the accumulators, and along the arm-thick cable connecting them to the wren. Before he'd

even reached the last tow, the first bar was half melted. On the other side of the room, Jamie and Victoria fell back as the door splintered open and a surge of morrismen poured through the door. They stopped. fearful of the crackling sparks inside.

Isiah heard an ominous bubbling, accompanied by an evil tang.

'The acid's boiling! Get out!' he yelled, starting a panicked

stampede as he ran for the door. Behind him, an accumulator exploded in a crunch of glass and vitriol.

Outside, he was grabbed.

'You've killed our wren! Where's our wren!' screamed the moms

master into his face. Isiah looked over at the Doctor, held captive a few feet away. Burst of light and exploding noises came from inside the workshop.

'Didn't it work?'

The Doctor smiled, raising an eyebrow conspiratorially.

Suddenly, something small, bright and very fast smashed through a shuttered window and shot into the air in front of them. It dashed about for a few seconds, then rose, faster and faster, through the midwinter sky. In its wake trailed lines and bursts of colour, overlapping one another like vivid, translucent veils. Isiah watched it rise, smiting. He could see the Doctor, Jamie and Victoria smiling too.

Beside him, he heard a strangled gulp, and he felt the morris

master's grip on him loosen. Isiah turned to see, amazed, that the man was weeping. The blackface ran beneath his tears.

'Ah. Thee's sent the wren to heaven.'

57

Do You Dream in Colour?

Gary Russell

An Adventure of Ben and Polly

'Tell me again – we're here because?'

Polly breathed in a long, deep lung full of air, exhaled slowly and slid her arm through her companion's, pulling him a bit closer.

'Because of all this.' she replied, nodding forwards.

Ben Jackson stared out at the grey sea lazily rolling towards the beach and shook his head. 'Honest, Duchess, sometimes I dunno why I listen to you. Really, I don't.'

Polly laughed gaily and stepped down from the top of the heather-

infested dunes, each step she and the reluctant Ben took taking them as far down as it took them forward until they were at the bottom of the rise and standing on the beach itself.

She unwrapped the headscarf, her blonde hair escaping into the

bluster around them as she tossed her head, freeing herself from city smoke, pollution, grime and everything else that she imagined to be cluttering up her aura. She kicked off her heels and smiled as the damp sand oozed around her toes.

Ben looked down, aghast. 'You're mad, Poi, you know that?'

Tin free, Benjamin,' she laughed. 'This is what living is all about!'

Ben shivered. Late December – he wanted the Caribbean, Hawaii or

the Balearics at a push. A beach on England's grey, cold, wet and windy north-eastern coast was not what he'd had in mind when Polly called up, suggesting that they take her uncle's place for Christmas.

Once before he'd joined his old... friend – travelling companion?

Co-conspirator? Fellow loony? Or... Or girlfriend? – for Christmas at her uncle's. That had been at his wooden, hut, suspended 18 feet above the surface of the Pacific, just off Papua New Guinea.

Now that was where you wanted to spend Christmas.

But, no, Uncle Rupert also had property in Northumberland. A place so ruddy cold, even the ships stayed away at this time of year.

Ben was wrapped up tight, white sweater, thick denims, DMs,

gloves, hat and his favourite merchant navy overcoat, thick and oiled enough to keep out arctic wind and rain.

He was freezing.

He hated northern England. As a London lad through and through.

he instinctively distrusted anything Maher than Hemel Hempstead. The north was cold, wet, unforgiving and grey. It was populated by

miserable people with weird accents that bore no resemblance to

English, wild stretches of flat moorland and densely packed towns with no toilets in the houses and back yards that opened onto one another.

At least, that's what he'd been brought up to believe.

Oh, and whippets.

But a few years travelling through space and time with the Doctor and another six sailing the seas of planet Earth had broadened his mind. Although this Christmas was already corning perilously close to undoing all that work and making him think that if the Daleks,

Cybermen or Macra ever visited his home planet, he'd gladly donate this dump to them.

But northerners knew how to brew a decent pint, he'd give 'em that.

'Uncle Rupert'll be here soon.' Polly smiled reassuringly. 'And then you'll soon be warm again. Promise.'

Ben shrugged, despite the cold. Polly had always been able to read hint. Ever since their time with... well, their travels around... around everywhere.

Polly slipped free of his arm and ran towards the sea.

'Pol!' he yelled over the wind. 'Pol, y'daft bird, it'll be freezing!'

But that was Polly Wright. Dolly bird, free spirit, joss-stick-waving believer in the good in everything, forever concerned with getting all touchy-feely with Mother Nature, She had once asked Ben if he could sneak her aboard his ship, get her out to the Middle East to join a kibbutz or something. It'd had taken a good hour or so to point out that not only could he not sneak her aboard a vessel of any kind, but,

as a merchant seaman, the chances of him going anywhere near the strife-ridden Holy Lands was as likely as him coming up on the premium

bonds.

Polly was now skipping happily through the wash, kicking up clods of cold sand. her long, multicoloured linen dress billowing behind her like a rainbow sail, every inch the hippy chick she never used to be.

Back when...

‘I love you, Duchess; he said, knowing how safe it was. If she

couldn’t hear him yelling, she certainly couldn’t hear him muttering the words he usually said to photos or postcards from her.

Ben blinked in surprise as she turned all the way from the swell, 59

cupped her hands to her mouth and yelled over the wind towards him.

‘What?’

She couldn’t have heard! Surely not!

Oh, God, no! She mustn’t know. She didn’t feel anything for him

beyond close friendship, and nothing could be allowed to spoil that.

‘I didn’t say anything!’ he yelled back, but Polly just shrugged and pointed to her ears, shaking her head.

Ben breathed out. She hadn’t heard him.

But she’d heard something...

He looked back the way they’d come, towards the huge castle that

dominated the area, and the roads around it. Nobody there, no cars, nothing. And then Ben realised something else was missing.

Years on the waters had told him one thing; there’s not a beach in the world that doesn’t have a constant shriek of scavenging birds swooping down for whatever bits of fish get too close to the surface.

Or bits of discarded food left by passing humanity.

This beach, cold and windswept it might be, should have seen flocks of gulls.

There was nothing here but him and Polly.

Nope. Just him...

'Polly!' he yelled louder than before, squelching through the sand.

'Where are you, Duchess?'

She couldn't have gone far – the beach was long and unbroken and

he was only ten feet away from the base of the heathery dune.

He ran down the sand and stopped, glancing quickly left and right.

Left, back in front of the castle slopes.

Nothing.

Right, down towards Seahouses.

Nothing.

Where was she?

Back towards the castle was dead straight – no one for miles. But the line of sight towards Seahouses curved. If she was anywhere, she had to be that way.

Ben found himself splashing through tiny pools of water formed by raised rings of sand, aware that his trousers were getting damp and mucky, but he didn't care. He shouted Polly's name three more times before stopping, bent over, hands on knees, breathless.

When had he got so unfit?

But there was something else, something he couldn't put his finger on. The beach just felt wrong. Dead wrong.

'Polly!' he yelled again.

Nothing.

No Polly. No birdsong. Even the sea seemed to have stopped making

noise, which was just daft...

But he wasn't deaf. The wind was still there, and he could hear his voice calling for Polly, the thunder of blood in his temples, his gasps for breath. One last cry...

' *Doctor!* '

And he stopped. Stopped breathing, stopped looking, stopped

imagining. He just stopped.

'Dammit!'

He was furious. Furious because he'd made a promise, four years

ago, that he'd never put himself in a position where yelling 'Doctor'

became instinct again. Became the failsafe. Became automatic.

Because the Doctor had left them, punishing them for some

unknown crime. One minute they'd been roaming the universe, the

next...

Polly had adapted quickly. She'd wanted to go home, see her family and friends. Because for them, Ben Jackson and Polly Wright had been away just one night. For the pair of them, it'd been months, maybe a year. And so much had happened – so much growing up, so much

experience, so much togetherness...

And then it was gone. and no one could ever know, Because no one

would believe them.

Something – a voice through the silence? – made Ben straighten up, turn and look over his shoulder and...

The sudden rush of sound was enormous and alarming and scary.

Gulls, waves, and a car horn all over the blustering wind, like air rushing into a vacuum.

And Polly's voice.

'Ben? Are you okay?'

He was back at the foot of the dunes, crouched in the heather, Polly face to face as she knelt in the sand, concern in her eyes, wide and bright.

But he'd been further down the beach, four or five hundred yards to the right...

Ben looked down the beach, to where he should have been. There

was a figure, bent double, hands on knees.

'But...' Ben breathed out quietly.

And the figure on the beach stood upright and turned backwards, as if looking to where Ben and Polly were now...

'Ben!' Polly said sharply, drawing his attention. A second later he glanced back, but the beach figure was gone.

'I asked if you're all right?' Polly nodded over his shoulder and Ben turned, 'Uncle Rupert's car.'

Sure enough, a gleaming burgundy Rolls was parked up in the public 61

car park, in front of the castle road, incongruous against nature's harsh December honesty.

'Duchess, 1 was... I was down there...' Ben tried to point, but knew it was a waste of time. She'd never understand.

Instead Polly helped him up, tossed her hair in the wind, pulled up her skirt and threaded her arm through his once more as they wandered towards the car.

They walked in silence, Ben breathing in Polly's closeness, but for once, his mind was elsewhere, focusing on the strange beach

experience rather than the usual mix of delight and self-pity he felt whenever she got tactile with him.

And just when it couldn't get any more unbearable, Polly squeezed a bit tighter and asked if she'd mentioned that Kristian was joining the family for the next few days. 'Uncle Rupert likes the way he decorates the tree,' she said, as if that instilled Ben's growing misery.

The car pulled into the bay area at Beal and slowed to a halt. Two

horse-drawn carts waited for them, each with a silent driver sat in them.

The driver of the Rolls got out and opened Polly's door, offering her his hand without speaking.

'Thank you, Patrick,' she said.

Ben had never worked out if Patrick was a Christian name or a

surname. He also couldn't remember the driver speaking at any point during the various Christmases or Easters Ben had spent on Holy

Island.

Ben opened his own door, which he noted with some satisfaction

gained him a frown from Patrick but, either way, the day Ben Jackson needed a bloke to hold a car door open for hint, was the day Ben

Jackson had spent too long in the world of the toffs.

He wasn't quick enough to get to the boot before Patrick had

somehow managed to scoop up Ben's sturdy navy duffle bag and

Polly's four suitcases. As the cases were put on one cart, Ben swiped his duffle bag so it travelled with him, a movement that gained a nice smile from Polly. She'd probably been waiting for him to do it, just as he always did.

He jumped up and sat between her and the driver, now on the left

The driver walked the horses on, gingerly treading onto the damp

causeway that linked the mainland to Holy Island, a causeway that would spend much of the following day underwater, cutting them off for nine hours at a time. A causeway too slender to cope with cars, much to Ben's frustration.

In the other cart, Patrick sat with Polly's cases as if protecting the 62

crown jewels.

The wind was whipping up across the causeway and, although the

jou rney to the house would only rake twenty minutes, Ben knew

they'd be freezing cold by the time they got there. Or at least, he would. Polly seemed immune to the elements, as always. Again, it just seemed to be another facet of her nature, serene, attuned to the world around her. Ben was convinced they could be in the eye of a hurricane and, as everything went to hell in a handcart, she'd sit there in a lotus position, chanting yoga mantras or whatever it was she did.

How far she'd come from the frightened, weedy secretary he'd first met in that nightclub back in 1966.

Of course, there was a good reason for that When you're fed a

constant diet of danger and monsters, you either get hardened to terror or freak out. Polly had coped far better than Ben had initially thought she would. He wanted to protect her, to be her brave knight in shoring armour. To this day, he wasn't sure at which point she stopped

screaming and started coping but it had been a growth rather than a sudden change. Hed missed it and assumed when they got home she

still needed him.

Kristian LeRoq was proof that she didn't.

The carts went through the tiny village, its windows and doors

already shuttered from the elements, past the pub, the lights and noise from within reminding Ben that there was always one good reason to come to the island. And then they were on the final approach to the ruined priory. Patrick jumped down off the other cart and ran forward, yanking open the gate that led down the private drive to the big house, which backed onto the National Trust lands, the current landlords of the huge Lindisfarne Castle,

Once open, the two carts trundled on, and Ben could see the manor house ahead, lights on in the lower windows. He knew the faint glow from a couple of the top ones meant candles were tit in the bedrooms he and Polly would be in - at opposite ends of the house, he mated wryly. Wonder which room Kristian LeRoq was meant to be in.

And which one he'd actually end up in.

Ben could feel Polly tense up slightly. He looked at her in concern –

she was staring dead ahead, shaking slightly.

He was about to alert the driver when Polly sighed loudly enough

that the driver heard.

‘Doctor!’ Polly gasped and shook her head, as if waking from a

sleep.

‘Do you need a doctor, miss?’ the driver asked in an accent verging on Scots.

‘What?’

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‘You asked for a doctor,’ he repeated.

Polly frowned. ‘Did 1?’ She glanced at Ben and so he responded by squeezing her hand.

‘It’s all right, mate,’ he said. ‘She’s fine. Just need to get into the warmth.’

‘Right you are, sir.’ And the cart trundled on, slightly faster.

‘Duchess?’ he asked quietly.

‘I’ll tell you later,’ Polly said. Then she looked at him, and he could see she was troubled. ‘I was elsewhere... yet here. On the cart and there was something bizarre...’ Her mouth dropped open, she realised

something. ‘Of course, everything was...’

‘Hello, there!’

The door to the manor was thrown open as they drew up. Uncle

Rupert and a butler or footman or whatever they were called were there

– Rupert grinning; the butler bloke looking as cold as always.

Ben actually liked Rupert, for all his toff trappings. It was hard not to – he had no airs and graces, just lots of money. He was originally from somewhere in Sussex, ran a series of oast houses that supplied to the breweries, made a million by selling up and bought the manor to live his lifelong fantasy of owning seclusion and privacy, which he

overruled at various holidays by inviting Polly's relatives and their friends up to stay.

The man was as into good beer as Ben was – automatically a good

bloke, therefore. And Rupert seemed to have none of the class baggage Ben had expected from Polly's upper-middle-class background.

He was rich, successful and not remotely snobbish.

Where did Polly get it from? Ben found himself smiling.

'Benjamin. Benjamin, Benjamin!' roared Uncle Rupert, grabbing his hand and shaking it vigorously. 'Good to see you, lad.'

Then he turned and gave his favourite niece the biggest, longest and most heartfelt hug Ben had ever seen. It might have bordered tin abuse if not for the delight in Polly's eyes. They adored each other in equal measure.

'Is Kris here?' Polly was finally able to breath as they separated.

Uncle Rupert said he was in the library, and Polly shot Ben a quick –

apologetic? – look as she skipped in.

Uncle Rupert regarded Ben for a moment, giving a look Ben hadn't

seen before. Then he sighed.

'You know what, Ben. If I could really use this money to change the things people believe it can, I'd pay a great deal to see her running to greet you that way instead of him.'

Uncle Rupert turned and walked smartly into the house. As Ben

stood speechless, the butler reached forward and wrested the duffle bag 64

hum his stunned hands.

Dinner that night was in the secondary dining room, smaller and more intimate than the grand one last Christmas had occupied. Of course, last year, there had been 23 guests. This year it was Ben and Polly, Kristian LeRoq, Uncle Rupert and a man from the village who Ben

learned was the new vet. There were also two people he remembered from last year: Miss Avril Trelawny and her guardian, Father Martin. a priest from somewhere near Sunderland.

Father Martin was a good guy, Ben recalled. Described himself as ‘a new-fangled trendy priest, out go the hymn books, in come the Beatles and the Kinks’. Taught under-privileged kids football, pool and how not to lose a fortune on the gee-gees. All this in between running his parish and a Sunday school, and being a patron of the hoard toying to preserve Lindisfarne and its cultural history.

Avril Trelawny was a different kettle of fish. She was quiet, almost catatonic at times, wide-eyed and innocent-looking. She smiled and simpered a lot, but didn’t seem to be firing on all cylinders. Not medically, at any rate. Ben had a sea mate who had a Down’s

syndrome brother and Ben had spent some great shore leave with him.

No Avril was just... withdrawn. Ben was never quite sure if she

understood the conversations but decided it was more gentlemanly to assume she did. So, he refused to let himself patronise her and tried to involve the girl in as much conversation as he could. Polly and Kristian were all quiet whispers and giggles, Father Martin and Uncle Rupert were chatting away about financial donations - good on ‘cm -- so that left Ben trying to engage Avril. After the starter – God knew what it was, but there was something eggy in there and some bizarre

blackcurrant goop that tasted of vinegar – there had been a choice of duck – a bit rich for Ben but he knew better than to complain – and some vegetarian pie for Polly and Kristian. Kristian wasn’t vegetarian but chose to eat it for Polly’s sake. Ben was going to kick himself for not doing the same then remembered it wasn’t a battle. It wasn’t even a game he could win. Better to have Pol’s friendship and be there for her when needed rather than, try to fight Kristian’s charm, looks and sophistication.

‘I’m psychic,’ Avril announced halfway through her duck.

Ben saw a tiny flicker of reaction from Father Martin, but no one else heard her, so Ben just nodded. ‘Really?’

‘Oh, yes. Father Martin doesn’t believe in such things, but I can talk to dead people.’ She leaned in conspiratorially. ‘Dead people and aliens.’

‘Right,’ he said slowly, fork halfway to his mouth.

Avril smiled. ‘You don’t believe in aliens. No one does. But those Americans found an alien at Roswell. I read about this. It’s all real.

Aliens live amongst us and they talk to me.’

Father Martin rested a hand on Avril’s arm almost lazily, and barely glanced towards her as he laughed. ‘A great imagination this one, Mr Jackson. Take no notice, though. She’s read too much Dan Dare.’

And he carried on talking to Uncle Rupert.

Avril sighed in a he-always-says-that manner and took another

mouthful of duck. ‘There are strange things on this island, you know,’

she said. The monks knew, back in the Middle Ages. All sorts of

records that have been suppressed over the centuries. Witches,

warlocks, demons and Elven folk.’ She laughed and Ben realised that not only was this the most he’d ever heard her speak, but it may have been the first time he’d heard her laugh.

‘Tell me about them,’ Ben replied, for want of anything better to say.

After all, she was talking, and that made a change.

‘You don’t believe me.’ She laughed quietly. ‘I’m okay with that.’

‘No,’ lied Ben. ‘No, of course I believe you.’

‘So you should.’ Avril put her cutlery down and put a hand on

Ben’s. ‘After all, you’ve seen so much more than I ever have.’

Ben stopped eating again and looked at her more closely. What did she mean? After all, she couldn’t possibly know about... couldn’t imagine what he and Polly had experienced.

He glanced over at Polly, but she was laughing at something Kristian had said.

Avril followed his gaze and sighed. ‘You always hoped, didn’t you.

From that first trip back in time, you hoped it would be her.’

Ben pulled his hand away. ‘That’s enough, Miss Trelawny,’ he

snapped, harsher than he’d meant. Harshly enough for Father Martin and Uncle Rupert to heard and glance over.

‘Benjamin? You all right, lad?’

Ben looked at Uncle Rupert apologetically. ‘Yeah, sorry. I was

just...’

Father Martin took Avril’s arm, not roughly but firmly. ‘Avril, it’s not fair to upset Mr Wright’s guests.’

Avril suddenly looked, incredibly vulnerable once again, the

innocent that Ben had previously seen. He thought she was going to cry.

‘Hey, it’s okay, it was my fault.’ He tried to smile at Avril, but she turned away.

By now Polly and Kristian were watching. Oh, great one, Ben. Show Polly you can make a young girl cry.

Avril placed her napkin on the table and excused herself.

As she passed the top of the table, Kristian was stating at Ben, but Polly stopped Avril to check she was okay. All Ben saw was Avril lean into Polly, and speak softly into her ear, straighten up and then leave the room.

Polly was staring firstly at her dinner plate, then slowly she looked at Ben. For a moment he thought Avril had exaggerated what he’d said, made hint look really bad. But then he saw Polly’s eyes,

He saw a look he hadn’t seen in four years.

A look she used to get when... when they travelled.., when they were together in space and time...

Polly stood up. Kristian put a hand out, but she ignored it. She

walked the length of the room until she was level with Ben.

And then she sat in Avril's chair. 'What did she say?'

Ben looked around the room. Whatever he said now, everyone would hear – although he took some satisfaction that Kristian was looking upset rather than confused. Oh, yeah, smarty French guy, she's talking to her best friend now!

Polly looked around at the table. 'Not here, not now.'

Ben remembered the incident on the cart as they approached the manor house. 'Was it what happened –' he began but Polly put her finger on his lips.

'Later.' And she smiled. 'But, yes. And Avril just asked me a question that implies more than one might think.'

'What?'

Polly took a deep breath. 'She asked me if I dream in colour.'

And then she got up and went back to Kristian, while Uncle Rupert and Father Martin resumed their talk, although it was quieter now.

Ben sat on his own. Suddenly wishing he and Polly were back in London. In her Chelsea flat, sipping red wine and discussing Warhol.

Ben never understood those discussions, but they were comfortingly real. A girl in Northumberland who knew about his and Polly's past, and asked questions like that, he understood that.

But it was a life he thought he was free from. He didn't want it back.

Happy bloomin' Christmas, Ben Jackson.

Ben sat in his bedroom, a candle flickering by the bed, an unread James Bond on the pillow, a glass of water untouched next to the candle.

The candle itself was just a 'touch', one of Uncle Rupert's likeable affectations. The manor was perfectly wired up but Rupert always liked to maintain a traditional feel at Christmas. Hence acting like it

was Victorian times. Luckily that didn't extend to the heating – he was proud of the fact he was the first person on Lindisfarne to have central
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heating, a fact Ben was immensely pleased by,

He crossed to the window and looked out on the front grounds,

staring again at the path the cart that had brought him here had taken.

A tiny light outside distracted him. A candle, a small one, a hand protecting the flame, he guessed by the way it flickered in and out of view as if in rhythm with someone walking. A woman's walk.

Avril. Had to be.

The light crossed left, towards the far side of the house, across the front door and onwards.

'It's a cold night,' he muttered to himself, already knowing he was going to head out to investigate.

Something weird was going on here – the incident on the beach... of course! It had been a dream of some sort! It was in black and white –

that was what he hadn't been able to put his finger on. That was why the beach had looked so strange.

He grabbed his seaman's overcoat and headed out of the room.

Getting out was easy – the butler hadn't locked up yet and so Ben and his candle patrolled the grounds, seeking out the mysterious light.

He crossed under the window to Polly's room. Ile glanced guiltily up, wondering if she was alone? Was Kristian in there? Worse – was she in his room? Why was that worse? Either way, it was bad.

'You took your time,' said a voice, close in his ear.

Ben jumped and found himself staring at Polly. He stared at her,

open-mouthed. The light from his candle flickered orange across her pretty face.

She hadn't aged, he noticed suddenly. After all they'd been through, all the traumas and fears and life-threatening moments that would

destroy so many other women, Polly was just as beautiful as she had been the night they'd met. She'd chucked a shawl around her shoulders but, beyond that, it was like the cold didn't affect her. Like always.

She touched his arm, and smiled. 'I saw the same light as you, I

imagine.'

Ben nodded dumbly. Then he looked behind her. 'Kristian with

you?'

Polly gave him a look that he couldn't quite interpret. Well, it was dark.

'Why?' was all Polly said.

'Well, because he... I mean, you and him... I just thought... well, you know...'

Polly suddenly seemed cross. 'No, Ben, I don't *know* actually. Are you always going to be this jealous with my choice of male friends?'

Ben felt dead embarrassed, but that just made him all the more

defensive. 'Well, you know, *actually* I think you can do better *actually*.

Actually I find him a bit of a ponce and...'

'Stop right there. You have absolutely no right to criticise him. Have you spoken more than six words to him tonight?'

Ben should have confessed he hadn't and that he was being

judgemental, but it was too late now.

'Well, Duchess, actually I don't want to talk to –'

'Oh, grow up!'

Polly turned away and strode off round the side of the house without another word.

With a sigh, Ben followed her. That went well, he thought.

He caught up with her as she approached an old wooden building.

‘It’s a summer house, backing onto a small pond,’ Polly said,

obviously seeing the question in his eyes.

Or perhaps she just knew him that well.

She blew his candle out but, before he could react, she pointed into the summerhouse and they saw the orange glow from another candle.

Polly was about to start forward when Ben caught her wrist. ‘What?’

she hissed.

‘Do you miss it?’

Polly stopped in her tracks and he could see even in the darkness lire shoulders droop slightly. She shivered for the first time, pulling the shawl closer. Without hesitating, Ben slipped his own overcoat off and draped it around her. She smiled and nodded thanks.

She looked again at the summerhouse and laughed gently.

‘I see someone walking around outside a house with a candle. A

woman I barely know asks me about a dream. Perfectly innocent things to normal people. And yet I’m out here, investigating. What do you think?’ She moved closer to Ben, taking his hand. ‘I miss him every day. And Jamie. And the TARDIS, the Daleks, the planets, the past and the future. God almighty, Ben, I want it back so badly.’

‘We nearly died.’

‘Daily. And I wouldn’t change any of it for the world. Today, in the cart when I drifted off, it was the first time I’d dreamt about the Doctor in months. A year perhaps, and I have no idea what caused it or even what the dream was now, but I want to be back out there more than anything.’

Ben nodded, gently. ‘You know I never felt the same way.’

Polly nodded. ‘Of course I do. That’s why I never talk about it with you. It’s something we shared but came at it from different angles.’

Polly took a deep breath.

And Ben felt his heart tense – he didn't know why, but he knew

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Polly well enough by now. It's that instinct all people have when they just know someone's going to say something life-changing to them.

'Ben, it's why no matter how much I know it hurts, I could never be with you. I love you, more than I'll love anyone else in the world, but it's just not...'

Ben went to reply, but her palm went over his mouth.

'If I don't say this now, Ben, I never will. And I'll carry on hurting you for ever.' She sighed. 'I know you don't like Kristian. Not sure I do either, frankly, and I'm fairly certain not see him after this break.

But there will be someone. I need people. I needed you when we were with the Doctor, but not now. I need someone who doesn't know, who never will. I have you, hopefully for ever, to be there when either of us needs to share, reminisce mask questions about him. But not as a

couple. It's not us. And don't you dare, even think this is some kind of class war thing, because if you know me at all you know it isn't.'

Ben nodded dumbly at this. If he had anything to say, and he'd been through this conversation in his head a trillion times already, it had gone. He just needed to hug this amazing, beautiful, fantastic woman and say, 'I understand,' and accept the fate she'd just given him.

Could he do that?

Or did he need to fight, to try to persuade her to do what he wanted?

lo make her realise it was those very same experiences that

necessitated their getting married, having kids – one had to be called James Robert Jackson, obviously – and being together until death

finally separated them.

But that was his dream. Not hers. Not Pol's.

'Of course, Duchess,' he said. 'And I love you too.'

A noise distracted them both and they turned to the summerhouse. It was Father Martin, candle outstretched.

‘She’s not my ward,’ he said in a voice that suggested it explained everything.

But, of course, to experienced adventurers like Ben and Polly, it did.

Sort of.

‘Avril?’ Ben asked in confirmation.

‘I brought her to see you two last year. You see…’ Father Martin strapped and then sat heavily on a wooden bench.

Polly sat beside him. ‘You thought we could help?’

‘No.’ Martin laughed gently. ‘No, Avril did. She has this… this gift.’

He looked at them both imploringly. ‘I don’t really believe in “gifts”, it’s not always God’s way. A hundred years ago, they’d have stuck her in a hospital for the insane. Three hundred years ago, she would have been burned as a witch.’

‘Do you trust us?’ asked Polly.

Father Martin shrugged. ‘But she does,’ he finished. The

summerhouse door opened and Avril emerged, and blew out her

candle.

Polly stood up so Avril could sit next to the priest.

‘Who are you?’ Ben asked.

Avril smiled. ‘My name is Tahn Jeraveril.’

‘Which planet?’

Father Martin gasped, but Avril patted his hand. ‘Not one you’d

have heard of, Mister Jackson. It’s called Bula and it’s beautiful.’ She looked at Polly. ‘I know you never went there. Otherwise I’d see it in your dreams.’

‘You can see into our dreams?’

Avril smiled tightly. ‘I’m so sorry. It’s an invasion of privacy.

Normally, I can stop it. But last Christmas, when we first met, you might as well have been broadcasting them on television.' She looked straight at Ben. 'Every dream you have I can read. I'm so sorry.'

Polly shrugged. 'What can we do to help you?'

'I want to go home. I was caught by slavers once, but escaped and another traveller brought me here, to keep me safe. The slavers would never come to an aggressive planet such as Earth.'

Ben looked at Father Martin. This obviously wasn't the conversation he'd been expecting. But he wasn't screaming or running away or

throwing holy water over them all. That was something, he guessed.

'I was hoping you'd know how to contact the Doctor. He is

legendary on my world and I know he'd manage to take me home.'

'Doubt that,' Ben laughed. 'He never got us where we wanted.'

Avril laughed too. 'Oh, I don't want the direct route. The scenic would suit me.'

Polly also laughed, and then stopped. 'I'm sorry. Tahn Jeraveril, but...'

'I know. Both of you today, I fed dreams into your minds once you were in range, to see if I could ascertain his whereabouts without having to alert you both. You see, I know how much it hurts you to think about the past now. I hadn't realised the wounds the Doctor had left on you both. I'm truly sorry I made you think about him so vividly today.'

Ben frowned. 'I didn't... think about him.'

'No. No, Ben, you automatically called for him in a moment of need.

But the emotions I felt in that told me all I needed to know. And, Polly, when I made you think of him and his TARDIS today, again, I'm

sorry.'

'I'm not,' Polly said, with a glance at Ben. Not recrimination, just confirmation of what she'd said earlier. 'I enjoy thinking about him. I

miss him.'

Avril nodded. ‘My search will go on. He visits Earth so often, one day I will surely find him.’

‘What now?’ asked Ben.

Avril shrugged. ‘If Father Martin will still have me after these

revelations, then I shall remain acting as his ward until the Doctor comes into my sphere of reference. If not – I can honestly say I am happy here.’

Father Martin smiled. ‘What kind of trendy Christian would I be if I failed to accept what I am being told now, Avril, you may stay with me as long as you wish. And if this Doctor person turns up, then I hope you take whatever chance you can to get home. Promise me this –

don’t waste your opportunity just to say goodbye.’

Avril hugged hint. ‘You’ll know if I ever leave you.’ She looked

back at Ben and Folly. ‘If it’s okay with you all, I’ll make sure you all know. I’ll tell you in a dream.’

Polly nodded. ‘I’d love that.’

Ben was going to disagree. He didn’t want more reminders of the

past. And yet... He looked at Polly. Saw what it would mean to her and maybe, perhaps, one day, it’d be nice if it would mean something to him to.

‘Me too,’ he said quietly. ‘Now I dunno about you lot, but I’m

bleedin’ freezing out here. Can we go inside? Tomorrow is Christmas Day and I’d prefer to eat my turkey – or turkey substitute,’ he added, smiling at Polly, ‘not dying of hypothermia.’

He held his hand out to Polly, who skipped over and took it, while Father Martin put an arm around Avril and escorted her ahead of them: Polly looked up at Ben. ‘One day I am going to go away, Ben. Maybe not for ever, but I do need to retreat, to find myself in Arabia or India or somewhere like that. It’d be nice if I thought every time I wanted to speak to you, I could just dream to you.’

Avril looked back. ‘I could arrange that,’ she said simply. ‘My

Christmas gift to you both.'

Ben shook his head. 'Nah. Lovely idea, but no, thanks.' He hugged Polly closer. 'Besides, Duchess, I don't need you in my head when I have you here.'

And he tapped his heart.

'Always.'

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The Nobility of Faith

Jonathan Clements

An Adventure of the Fourth Doctor

'No!' shouted Ala ud-Din. 'You cannot leave me here!'

'I can, and I will,' laughed the vizier, turning from the edge of the well without a backward glance, his black cape swirling behind him.

Ala ud-Din pleaded in vain, but rocks and boulders mined down, as the henchmen of his false uncle did the bidding of their unscrupulous master, pushing debris into the well, until it was blocked. Fearing he would be stoned to death, Ala ud-Din retreated into the dark cave at the well's base, watching with tears in his eyes as the rocks blocked his escape, and the sun itself.

Not a scrap of light poked through. Ala ud-Din was trapped in the very cave that be had explored for the false uncle, with nothing to his name but the sputtering, dying flames of his torch.

He cursed his tormenters, knowing that they walked from the scene of their crime assured still of Paradise, for 'the live man bath no murderer' and was not Ala ud-Din still alive? Were the white wings of death to take him, it would be from slow hunger.

Ala ud-Din sat dejected in the cave. His eyes saw, but dimly in the half-light. The flames of his torch flickered weakly, as if reaching out to him in solace. Before long, it had perished, starved of oil as Ala udDin himself would soon be starved of life.

Ala ud-Din recited every prayer he knew, every ghazal and story. He felt his way slowly, around the cave, feeling stones beneath his touch, unaware now if they were pebbles or gems. The gold and jewels

around hint lost their lustre, their starry sparkle. They did not shine in the darkness.

He heard the low cackle of dew seeping along the cave wall. His

fingers found it, and he lapped like an animal at the slow waters. Left alone with his thoughts, Ala ud-Din came to curse time itself, the sole witness of his dark demise for what might have been hours, or days.

‘I testify that there is no God save Thou alone,’ he said to the cave.

‘the Most Great, the Omnipotent, the All-conquering, Quickener of the dead. Creator of man’s need and Granter thereof, Resolver of his

difficulties and duress and Bringer of joy. Thou art my sufficiency and Thou art the Truest of Trustees. And I hear any witness that Mohammed is Thy servant and Thine Apostle, and I supplicate Thee, O my God, by his favour with Thee to free me from this my foul plight.’

The cave remained silent.

And then the cave roared at him. The dark was torn by a sound like the grinding of bones and the shearing of metals. Something pushed at the rocks and gems, and Ala ud-Din saw a new, unearthly blue light.

Stones tumbled near him, and he feared for his life.

When the silence returned, Ala ud-Din saw the blue light remained.

A blue lamp sputtered at him in the cave. And from the lamp came a manlike figure.

‘I know what you are!’ said Ala ud-Din.

‘You do?’ said the new arrival. ‘Fancy that.’ He reached into a paper bag and drew out a morsel of rose-coloured candy. He offered the bag to Ala ud-Din.

‘Would you like a baby of *loukoum*?’ he asked.

Ala ud-Din looked down in fear at pieces of bright jelly, each one fashioned in the small image of a human figure. He pushed the bag away infector.

‘You are an ifrit like those of the time of Solomon,’ he said. ‘A creature born of subtle fire. A guardian of the sacred and secret. A *djinni*.’

‘If you say so,’ said the djinni, his eyes widening to the size of platters. ‘And you are?’

‘I am called *Ala ud-Din*, the Nobility of Faith.’

The djinni paid Ala ud-Din little heed. Instead he peered into the gloom, lit intermittently by his blue lamp. He opened its door

somewhat, and more light came from within, affording a proper view of the chamber. The djinni’s eyes fell on the mountains of treasure, but did not covet it.

The djinni was not naked as the old scrolls might tell. His skin was not blue, though often it appeared so in the light of his lamp. He wore strange clothes – a covering on his head with a brim of stiffened felt, and a long, winding, woollen stole of many colours. But it was his coat that intrigued Ala ud-Din most of all.

‘My word,’ he said, reaching out to touch it, heedless of danger. The djinni might smite him, it might curse him to eternal damnation, it might turn him into fast fires, but it merely gazed at Ala ud-Din in bafflement. ‘These fastenings. I have never seen their like before.’

‘Buttons?’ said the djinni.

‘ *Bat-onz*,’ said Ala ud-Din. ‘Like the frog-ties of my mother’s far Cathay, but of circular form and what appears to be some kind of shell.

And, see here? They will fasten through the gimleted slits on the other side...’

‘Yes,’ said the djinni, slapping away his hand. ‘Buttons! What are you, a tailor?’

‘Why, yes,’ said Ala ud-Din. remembering himself, stepping back in awe. ‘Or rather, a tailor I was, until my troubles began, and my fake uncle lured me to this cave.’

The djinni hissed through his teeth.

‘A cave,’ he mused. ‘Not what I wanted at all.’

‘What you want is immaterial,’ said Ala ud-Din.

‘I think you’ll find,’ said the djinni, ‘that what I want is very important. I have been sent from the World of Shadows to apprehend a criminal.’

‘Be that as it may,’ said Ala ud-Din. ‘I have freed you from your lamp. And now you must obey me.’

‘Steady on!’ said the djinni. ‘We’re in this together.’

‘I know the laws of your race,’ said Ala ud-Din. ‘I have freed a slave of the lamp, and that makes me its master for three iterations.’

‘Oh, no, it doesn’t,’ said the djinni.

‘Oh, yes, it does,’ said Ala ud-Din.

‘Oh, no, really, it doesn’t,’ said the djinni.

‘In faith, by God and all that is sacred, it does,’ said Ala ud-Din.

‘Fine,’ said the djinni. ‘Have it your way. I need to get out of this cave, and you can come with me if you wish.’

‘That,’ said Ala ud-Din, ‘is precisely what I wish. You are a fine and loyal djinni, who predicts any every need. Let that be my first.’

‘Come on, then,’ said the djinni, beckoning Ala ud-Din back inside the lamp. *[Translator’s note – it is unclear how a lamp can be entered.*

Some suspension of disbelief is required, lest we hane faith that a lamp may be bigger on the inside than on the outside.]

Ala ud-Din had never been inside a lamp before. His eyes,

accustomed to the darkness of his imprisonment, ached at the

brightness of the djinni’s lair, a chamber encircled by many roundels that glowed with their own light. And at the centre a round table like a Frankish clock, whirring with unknown sorceries.

‘I was hoping,’ mused the djinni as he worked the contraption, ‘for Samarkand.’

‘I too!’ said Ala ud-Din. ‘Samarkand of the cool breezes and calm shades. Its gardens green against the heat of the desert. Its lion heads

of yellow brass like gold, which form fountains by the flower beds. Its waters and its women sweet and soothing. But it is some hours ride to 75

the east'

'Oh,' said the djinni. 'That's good.'

'It is not,' said Ala ud-Din.

'Oh, yes it is,' said the djinni.

'In faith, my disobedient servant,' said Ala ud-Din. 'You do not

understand the gravity of my situation.'

'Hah!' laughed the djinni. 'Do not speak to me of gravity. Do out speak to me of the speed of dark. Do not talk to me of the energies of light in particles.' *[Translator's note – your guess is as good as mine.]*

'You are a churlish figure, and not like any djinni from songs I have heard.' said Ala ud-Din. 'Know that my false uncle is the grand vizier, and intends to take my betrothed as his bride.'

'New development, is it?' said the djinni, suddenly attentive.

'What?'

'This take uncle of yours, is he a new arrival? With strange powers?'

'Yes,' said Ala ud-Din, unsurprised that a djinni might be quick in thought like a spark of hot fire. 'He boasts of Frankish magics, powers beyond mortal understanding.'

'And by any chance,' said the djinni, 'would he happen to have a...

well, I suppose it would look a bit like a copper ring?'

'Yes!' said Ala ud-Din. 'A ring that bends the realness of things. He boasted of it to Badroulbadour in the bazaar. He said he would always be in the right place to do mischief, always arrive at the right –'

'Time. All right, all right,' said the djinni, his eyes intent upon the glass and metal facings of his table. 'I'll see what I can do.'

'He left me here to die, in this treasure vault.'

‘Strange place to do it.’

‘They shall feign to find me here, starved and dead some time hence, and in death I will be remembered as a thief,’ said Ala ud-Din. ‘Even my widowed mother shall disown me, and the beauteous

Badroulbadour shall forget she ever loved me.’

‘Chin up,’ said the djinni, not even meeting his master’s eyes. ‘It seems we share an adversary.’ He smiled at Ala ud-Din with teeth like a wolfs, and his eyes sparkled.

Ala ud-Din heard the distant grinding of the djinni’s machine. ‘We must leave,’ said Ala ud-Din.

‘We are leaving,’ replied the djinni.

‘We are going nowhere,’ said Ala ud-Din. ‘There is no time.’

‘Time,’ said the djinni, ‘is not as you think it to be, young Ala udDin. Nor is space.’

‘I am but a humble tailor,’ protested Ala ud-Din.

‘Time and location are not single points,’ said the djinni. ‘They are lines that meet and entwine like threads that cross and cross again.’

‘Like warp and weft?’

‘As you say.’

‘On a carpet?’

‘Like,’ sighed the djinni wearily, ‘a carpet.’

‘And your lamp,’ said Ala ud-Din. ‘It is like a carpet of magic?’

‘Something like that, yes,’ said the djinni. And he opened the door.

The cold struck at them like Bedouin knives, warring against their flesh.

‘Samarkand!’ cried Ala ud-Din in delight, looking out upon the

familiar rooftops and spires, breathing the sharp night air in joy. The djinni's lamp that was like a box, which trod on time like a carpet, had brought them to the roof of the palace itself.

'What of the shade and sweet waters?' said the djinni with a scowl.

'It is the coldest month of the year,' said Ala ud-Din, realising the djinni's sundry eternities of imprisonment might have caused it to lose track of the months and years. 'It is Dhu al-Qi'dah, the month of the Master of Truce, when none in Araby would fight.'

'Just my luck,' said the djinni, clutching his wondrous coat with its *bat-onz* to him.

Even in Samarkand, where heat in summer was so oppressive that

the people slept during the day and left their palaces at night,

midwinter was harsh and cold; the winds had the flavour of snow about them, a white chill like peppermint and sherbet on the throat. The desert still was dry, but the freezing tiles felt sharp on bare skin.

Where is everyone?' asked the djinni, peering down at the dark city, with but a few tights peering through doorways blocked by heavy

tapestries.

'For some, it is the feast of Isa, who was born of Maryam,' explained Ala

The djinni looked at Ala ud-Din in surprise, at his turban and

hempen robes, his yellow-brown skin and his features of Araby.

'Christmas?' said the djinni.

'Yes,' said Ala ud-Din. 'A time of gifts for the followers of Isa. But no gift for me. For most of the townsfolk are assembled in the great hall, I am sure, for the wedding that was to have been mine.' He gazed forlornly upon the iron gates of the rooftop entrance, with their great locks and immovable bolts. 'There is no way for us to steal into the palace. I wish it were not so. I wish it.'

The djinni chuckled, and took a wand from his coat.

'No door is closed to me,' he said.

In the antechamber to the great hall, Badroulbadour sat in the finest brocades a bride had seen in Samarkand, and wept. She wore silks and

jades of far Cathay, decorated with the dragons and serpents of Ala udDin's distant family home. The dress, made by Ala ud-Din's mother, the widow Tuan, for a different wedding, was now put to a more

unwelcome use.

'It is not over,' said the widow Tuan. 'We may still resist the vizier.'

'Ala ud-Din is gone,' wailed Badroulbadour. 'He was as noble in

faith as his mine suggested. He passed praise, and now he is taken from me.'

'Soon it will be your wedding to the vizier,' said the widow Tuan.

'We must throw ourselves from the tower.'

'No!' said Badroulbadour. 'That is a sin, in my religion and in

yours.'

'Actually,' confessed the widow Tuan, 'not so much in mine. Death comes before dishonour to women of far Cathay.'

Badroulbadoer let out a moan and looked mournfully at her mirror.

Her eyes were unrimmed with kohl for sake of weeping, yet still as dark as sable.

'You are bereft,' said the widow Tuan. 'I know it so. For Ala ud-

Din's father was taken from me, too, not by earthbound malice, but by the Destroyer of Delights, he that comes in the end to take us all.

Thank the Almighty that fashioned you, for those fleeting days you had with your beloved. And pray to him for swift release from the torment that is to come.'

A shadow fell upon them, and the ladies looked up to see the vizier in his dark robes, blocking the door.

'Torment!' he laughed. 'Fair Badroulbadour, life with me will not be a torment unless you will it so.'

‘I know it!’ spat Badroulbadour.

You know nothing,’ said the grand vizier. ‘You know nothing of the World of Shadows, whence I came, and the great sorceries that made me your master.’ He held up his copper ring and looked at it lovingly.

‘Fair Badroulbadonr, if only you knew the promises of dine, of ifrit and djinn and worlds beyond. I can show you all these things, and make you queen of Samarkand, Don your veil and come out into the hall, lest I command my soldiers to drag you there, Your Ala ud-Din will not save you now.’

‘Oh, yes, he will!’ said the widow Tuan.

‘Oh, no, he will not,’ said the vizier, knowing full well of his

previous intrigues. ‘Your Ala ud-Din is far, far away.’

‘You are a liar,’ said Badroulbadour, standing with proud fire. ‘My Ala ud-Din shall save me. I know this. For I know he is behind you.’

‘He’s where?’ sneered the grand vizier.

‘He is, most assuredly, behind you,’ said the widow Tuan.

The grand vizier turned to look, and Ala ud-Din smote him,

snatching from him the copper ring of enchantments. He hurled it

behind him into the great hall.

‘Fly, my djinni!’ he shouted, grappling with the vizier.

Badroulbadour and the widow Tuan exchanged glances. Beyond, in

the hall, there was the sound of a great commotion. Guards rushed in and pulled away Ala ud-Din from the vizier.

In the great hall, the crowd that had assembled for the wedding

watched in fearful silence as the vizier entered. The djinni had been wrestled to the ground, and the copper ring snatched back from him.

‘Fly!’ yelled Ala ud-Din, struggling in vain against his raptor’s grasp. ‘Why do you not fight, my djinni?’

‘This is not a djinni,’ said the vizier. ‘He is my countryman of the World of Shadows.’

‘Here to recapture you,’ growled the djinni.

‘Here to enslave me,’ laughed the vizier. But who is the slave now?’

‘This man is a criminal,’ shouted the djinni to the bewildered

congregation. ‘He does not belong here.’

‘The people of Samarkand do not care for your prattling,’ said the vizier, brandishing the ring. ‘You have failed in your quest to unseat me, and now I shall be the master of this realm. I shall be –’

And suddenly, with a flash, the vizier disappeared.

‘You shall be gone,’ said the djinni with a voice like distant thunder.

‘Returned to the World of Shadows whence you came.’

The djinni turned his unearthly eyes to gaze upon the soldiers.

‘Would any of you like to join him?’ he asked.

The guards fell back in fear, loosening their hold on him.

Ala ud-Din turned to his own captors and met their stares.

‘I am Ala ud-Din,’ he said. ‘Ally of the subtle fires and noble in faith. Where is your master now?’

The guards released him and bowed in homage. Badroulbadour

rushed to her betrothed with tears of joy. The widow Tuan smiled.

Up on the roof, the djinni stood before his lamp to say his farewells to Ala ud-Din and the fair Badroulbadour. Ala ud-Din asked the djinni to stay.

‘I do not possess the sorceries you claim for me,’ said the djinni. ‘I came only for the vizier.’

‘But,’ said Ala ud-Din. ‘You made him disappear.’

‘I had his ring for scant moments,’ said the djinni. ‘But in that time, I set its charms to return it to its home.’

‘The World of Shadows?’

‘The World of Shadows. Where justice awaits him.’

‘As you say,’ said Ala ud-Din. ‘Thank you, djinni, for your loyal service.’

The djinni shook his head with a knowing smile, and turned towards his lamp.

Ala ud-Din clutched his beloved Badroulbadour to him and said:

‘Djinni, you have only granted two of my wishes.’

‘Actually,’ said the djinni with a frown, ‘I haven’t granted any.’

‘You are a wily slave,’ said Ala ud-Din with a smile. ‘But my final desire is simple. I wish only to be happy ever after. And with that I shall release you.’

‘Whatever you say,’ said the djinni. And with that he re-entered his lamp, and was gone.

Then Ala ud-Din and his bride went back below, where the people of Samarkand were assembled in fear and wonder at his alliance with

such powers.

So it was, that in time he became the lord of Samarkand, and he

commanded and dealt justice to the lieges, so that all the folk loved him, and he lived with his wife in all solace and happiness until there came to him the Severer of Societies and the Destroyer of Delights.

24 Crawford Road

Ian Farrington

An Adventure of the Seventh Doctor, with Melanue Bush

‘Another few minutes, Sarah, and then that’s it,’ said Mother. ‘You can take your brother to bed first, then go yourself.’

I knew I would be pushing my luck to try to stay awake any longer, even on Christmas Eve, My parents were being good enough as it was, allowing Michael and me to enjoy a little more of the day. As Father had said over lunch, the anticipation of something was always better than the thing itself. But tomorrow was Christmas Day! Surely that didn't apply.

Father was reading in his usual chair. I could tell that he would have preferred it if Mother had not had the wireless on, but she was sitting next to it, leaning in and smiling as she listened to her programme. My brother was playing at her feet – he had little wooden soldiers lined up in front of him, and he was pretending that they were about to make an attack across the hearth.

Of all the Christmas Eves I could remember, this was the best so far.

Father had had a promotion at the bank a few weeks earlier he enjoyed telling anyone who'd listen that no one from Croydon had ever risen so highly in the company. This had meant we were better off, he'd told Mother, and we seemed to have more food in the house than ever

before. I looked across at Michael. He knew to keep his voice down, that Father would have sent him straight to bed if he disturbed his reading, but he was mumbling under his breath. I could just make him out giving his soldiers their orders: 'Charge for the enemy, my lad!

Take no prisoners!'

His eyes were wide – I could tell there was little chance I'd be able to get him to go to bed in the next few minutes.

Knock-knock-knock.

Father dropped his book, and looked across at Mother.

'Whoever could that be, at this time? Don't they know it's Christmas Eve?' He didn't like unannounced visitors at the best of times.

'I don't know, dear,' said Mother as she clicked the wireless off. 'I'd better go and see.'

The three of us listened as she went into the hallway and opened the door.

‘Oh, Doctor, at last –’ said a woman. ‘Oh, sorry. I was looking for a friend of mine. Is he here?’ Her voice made her sound young, though probably older than me. And friendly.

‘Come in for a moment, my dear. It’s terribly cold out there for what you’re wearing.’ The door clicked shut. ‘I’m afraid your friend isn’t here, but come in and get warm.’

Father sighed very loudly and slammed his book down on the arm of his chair. He stood up and straightened his jacket before Mother

returned with our guest.

‘Take a seat by the fire,’ Mother was telling her. ‘The one next to the wireless. I’ll get you a warm drink.’ She then went through to the kitchen. ‘Thank you,’ said the woman, smiling apologetically around.

She had long, beautiful red hair in big curls, and was wearing the oddest clothes. She had a blue top and white trousers – both with spots!

It was like what you’d wear at the beach. Without even looking round, I could just tell my Father was disapproving of her.

‘What’s your name?’ Trust Michael to get straight to the point – one of the advantages of being five years old, I suppose.

‘My name’s Mel,’ she said. ‘What’s yours?’

My brother suddenly got very nervous at such direct communication from an adult and went back to his soldiers.

‘Please excuse him, miss,’ I said. ‘He’s called Michael. And I’m

Sarah.’

‘Very pleased to meet both of you; she said, shaking my hand.

My father coughed loudly, interrupting. ‘How can we... er... how can we help you, young lady?’

‘Yes, sorry,’ she said. ‘As I say, I was looking for my friend. I’m not quite sure what happened, or where he’s gone. We travel together, you see, but... Well, just now, he vanished. Or maybe I vanished. It’s hard to tell.’

‘I see.’ said Father, but he clearly didn’t.

Mother returned with a cup for Mel – cocoa, by the smell of it.

‘Here you go,’ she said. ‘My husband and I were about to have some anyway.’

Mel thanked her, and took a sip. Something then caught her eye –

the tree.

‘Oh, is it Christmas?’ Just as Father was starting to reply, she carried on – talking to herself; though, this time: ‘Of course it is, how silly of me. There’s a tree; it’s Christmas.’ She looked over at me, ‘Are you 82

looking forward to the new year, Sarah? What do you think 19...’

‘Thirty-six?’ I said.

‘Yes, what do you think 1936 will be like?’

Professor Gregson liked the quiet. He liked the stillness, the lack of disturbances. That was why he’d taken up fishing, why he enjoyed

hiking, why he went on holidays on his own. Why he lived alone.

Alone with his thoughts, he found, he was more at peace than when he had to deal with other people.

It was perhaps, he’d often thought, why he’d become an

archaeologist. All those long, intensive bouts of careful investigation, of methodical actions, had appealed to him. To be allowed to retreat into his own thoughts. and block out the rest of the world, if only for a while, had its benefits.

But, of course, archaeology wasn’t exactly a loner’s paradise.

Gregson did enjoy the sense of teamwork and the friendships-both

professionally and personally – he’d developed during his forty-year career, but he also took any opportunity he could to work alone.

That was why he’d not thought twice about going to the site today, when only Matt, the security guard who looked after the dig’s

perimeter from his little portacabin, would be around. Gregson had smiled hello to Matt as he’d driven in, and seen that he’d had his little portable TV on. It was that show that was on every Christmas Day

morning: Noel Edmonds visiting kids in hospital or something.

Gregson took a step back from his work – his team had uncovered

most of the relevant layer now so, for the first time on this dig, they could see the whole context. It had been months of hard work, and Gregson had been waiting for this time: when the area becomes less like a building site, and more understandable.

His team had left on the twenty-third, and weren't due back until the new year, so Gregson knew he had a good few days with the dig to

himself. Not that he'd do much digging: now was the time for

recording the evidence they'd found, for evaluating what they'd

unearthed. With no one else around, he found he could think more

clearly

'Oh, hello! How strange!'

Gregson looked up and saw someone standing just outside the

defined area. What was Matt playing at, letting some stranger just walk in?

'Can I help you?' asked Gregson.

'I hope so,' said the man, quickly raising and lowering his hat. 'I'm the Doctor, and I'm looking for a young woman.'

'Aren't we all?' The man's brow furrowed quizzically at this clearly 83

not understanding the joke. Gregson ploughed on. 'But I'm not sure why you're looking here. This is private property.'

The Doctor looked around the site – for the first time, it appeared.

'Oh, is it?' he said, face crumpling apologetically. 'I'm sorry about that. I didn't mean to trespass.'

'Well, you have,' said Gregson, turning away. 'Please leave or I'll call for security. In fact –' he turned back '– just how did you get in here?'

'Well... I'm not quite sure.' He leant on his umbrella, and pulled out an antique-looking pocket watch. He checked it, looked around, then

replaced the watch in his pocket, tutting. ‘But that’s not important.

First need to find my friend.’

‘Well, I’m sorry about that,’ said Gregson. ‘But there’s no one here except me and security.’

‘We’ve been separated somehow,’ the odd man continued. ‘You see,

it happened just as we left the TARDIS.’ He suddenly spun round, 360

degrees, then stared directly at Gregson. ‘By the way, have you seen my TARDIS?’

Mother had finally managed to settle Father down. She knew his

moods better than anyone, and had got him sitting in his chair, She sat next to hint, on the arm.

‘This is very kind of you,’ said Mel.

‘You said you were looking for your friend,’ Mother asked.

‘Yes. We were together, but then I don’t know what happened. I was outside your front door. I just assumed the Doctor had come in here...’

‘This Doctor,’ said Father. ‘He’s your “friend”, is he? What are you, his patient?’

‘Ignore him, dear,’ said Mother. ‘He’s still digesting his meal. I’m sorry, but you’re the only visitor we’ve had tonight. You said you didn’t know what had happened. Where were you and your friend

going?’

Mel looked as if she didn’t know what to say – like when Michael

gets caught being naughty. ‘Well, I’m not sure how to explain it,’ she said. ‘We travel around together –’

‘Like gypsies?’ said Michael, laughing.

‘Not quite, no.’ Mel smiled at him. ‘We explore. We just go

wherever we want to and see what’s there. The Doctor’s like that – he always wants to know what’s over the next hill. Usually, I haven’t the faintest idea where we’re going until we get there, but this time... This

time, the Doctor said we had something to sort out. He said it was dangerous, that we had to be quick. But then...'

'Yes?' I said.

'Well, he disappeared and –' A shocked look crossed her face. 'Oh, my. The TARDIS! Where's the TARDIS?' Mel sprang out of her seat

and ran to the curtains. She pulled them back, and I could see the street outside. Mel was frantically searching for something. 'It's not there!'

'What's not there, my dear?' Mother had moved across to Mel, and

was looking out too.

'The – well, the Doctor's vehicle, I suppose. It should he there! I'd only just stepped out...'

Whatever it was that had happened, we could all see Mel was upset.

Mother shepherded her back into the seat by the fire, and even Father was starting to look concerned.

'Look,' he said softly. 'I'm sure your friend is around somewhere.

Perhaps... yes, perhaps you got the wrong house, eh? I bet your friend is next door, having a cup of tea with the Robinsons. Why don't I go and check?'

Mel smiled at him. 'Yes, thanks. You're probably right. That's very kind.'

While Father got his coat from the hall, Mother went to get Mel

some more cocoa. Michael passed one of his soldiers to Mel.

'I got these last Christmas,' he said.

'Did you?' said Mel. 'They're lovely, aren't they? Are you their

general?'

'Yes. And I haven't lost a battle yet!'

Mel was so good with Michael. She knew just how to talk to him,

and could see he was besotted with her. She was older than me maybe about twenty or so. Perhaps she's used to dealing with children, I thought. But she was also good at talking to Mother and Father.

Michael was telling Mel all about Christmas, as if she'd never had one before. I suppose when you're five years old, it's all new and fresh and exciting. Wait until he gets to 12!

Mel then told us about her last Christmas.

'It was just me and the Doctor, but it was lovely,' she said. 'We had a meal and and a lovely bottle of wine the Doctor had got from the south of France. I'm not really sure how long ago it was – I know that sounds odd, but the Doctor and I travel a lot and we tend to lose track of time. Our last Christmas could have been six months ago, for all I know.'

'That's silly,' said Michael. 'Christmas is on the same day every year.'

'Well...' said Mel. 'Yes, it is. But, you know how different parts of the world have different times? How it might be the evening here, but it's already tomorrow morning in Australia?'

Michael turned to me, genuinely confused. 'Is it?'

'Yes,' I said.

'Well,' continued Mel, 'when you travel as much as we do, you lose and gain days here and there. We go back and forth all the time, never in a straight line. I sometimes think the Doctor would be unable to go from A to B by the quickest route. There's always some stone to look under, or someone new to meet.'

Mother returned with the cocoa – this time, there were mugs for all of us. 'Be careful,' she said, as she always did. 'It's hot.'

We sipped at our drinks for a moment and then, through the window, I saw Father returning.

'I'm sorry, Mel,' he said as he took his coat off. 'There's no sign of your friend next door. I even went over to number 23, and checked at the Haywoods'. They're away at his mother's until the second week of

January, and the house looks locked up and untouched.'

Gregson had finally managed to get some sense out of the Doctor. It appeared his pal, someone called Mel, had gone missing and, for some reason, the Doctor thought he or she had stumbled onto Gregson's site.

'What is this, anyway?' asked the Doctor, changing the subject. 'A dig of some kind?'

'What?' Gregson snapped. 'I thought you were looking for your

friend?'

'I am. But what you're doing here may have some significance. Mel went missing just as we arrived in this area the TARDIS too.' He

waved the tip of his umbrella around, gesturing to the site. 'So perhaps it's all connected. You're an archaeologist, I take it?'

'Um, yes, of course.' Gregson sighed, realising his peace was

already ruined. He stepped out of the shallow pit and shook the

Doctor's hand. 'Professor Gregson. I'm the site coordinator here.'

'And what is your site?' The Doctor squatted down like a golfer to get a better view of the trench's contents. 'It looks like a house. Well, we are in the suburbs; that makes sense.'

Gregson couldn't tell if the Doctor was talking to him or not, but replied anyway. 'Yes, we're looking at the contains of a detached house, built early this century – quite a desirable residence for the middle classes in its day.'

'And by "this century", do you mean the twentieth?' asked the

Doctor absent-mindedly.

'Of course I do. Anyway, since the house was razed, the site's been used as various things a builders' yard until the seventies, for example, a car park since then. There's a supermarket just round the corner, you see. But despite its location and surroundings, no one's built on it since the rubble was cleared. There have been evaluations by developers, but 86

every project's fallen through for some reason or other. What all that

means is that we knew the archaeology had a great chance of having survived. There was no investigation done when the house was

destroyed – the land was just levelled and sold.'

'I suppose the authorities had other things on their minds...' said the Doctor, lightly brushing at the soil with his fingers.

'How do you mean?'

'I take it the house was hit by a German bomb.'

'No, this was already an empty lot by then – 24 Crawford Road was burnt down before the war. If you read the reports from the time, the house was completely gutted. In fact, it's those reports that first got me interested in the site. There's a mystery here, Doctor.'

Gregson knew he'd switched on his professor-talking-to-student

tone, but it helped him explain things.

'The bodies of the family who lived here were never found, and they were never seen or heard from again. Perhaps the fire destroyed their remains – as I say, no official investigation was carried out at the time

– but there are too many loose ends. We also don't even know how the fire started: was it arson? An accident? The local tittle-tattle says the father of the house had a funny turn and set his own living room on fire

– though how anyone would know what really happened is beyond

me.'

The Doctor stood up, pulling the pocket watch out again. Gregson

could hear it ticking quite clearly. 'And when was this fire?'

'Sixty years ago, almost to the day. Christmas Eve 1935.'

'Can I do anything to help?' said Mel. 'You've been so kind.'

'No, that's fine,' said Mother. 'Look, it's getting late. You'd better stay with us for the night, and then we'll try to help you find your friend tomorrow.'

Mel looked frustrated but said that perhaps Mother was right. She still

wanted to help, though, and started to collect the empty cocoa mugs.

‘At least let me wash these, it’s the least I can do.’

Mother explained that Daisy would deal with the washing up before she prepared tomorrow’s meal. Mel said she hadn’t realised we had a maid.

‘She comes in once a week to help my wife,’ said Father

defensively. ‘And she lives alone, so she’s going to join in for our meal tomorrow.’

‘I’m sorry,’ said Mel, ‘I didn’t mean to –’

Knowing that Father needed to calm down, I jumped in: ‘Mel, you

can help me put Michael to bed if you like.’

Mother said, ‘Yes, that would be good, wouldn’t it, Michael? Thank you, Sarah.’

He didn’t want to go to bed, of course. But I think the fact that Mel was helping me made the process a bit easier. She even carried him up the stairs, and he was almost asleep on her shoulder before we reached his room. Mel lowered him down into his bed as I drew the curtains shut. After Michael was tucked in, his eyes trying to stay open, Mel and I sat on his bed and we talked softly.

‘I remember,’ said Mel, ‘when I was about your age, Michael. One

Christmas Eve, I tried on hard to stay awake because I wanted to see Father Christmas. I wanted to see what he looked like. But, the trouble is – and I only found this out when I got older that Father Christmas will only visit you if you’re fast asleep.’

Michael’s eyes were virtually closed now.

‘So, sleep well and then, tomorrow, when you wake up, he’ll have

been.’ We sat for a few minutes, just to make sure he’d dropped off.

I whispered to Mel, ‘I know the truth, you know. About Father

Christmas.’

‘What do you mean, Sarah?’

‘That he doesn’t exist.’

She smiled sadly. ‘He does if you want him to. The Doctor’s shown me that.’

‘We’ll find your friend, Mel. I promise. He can’t have got far on Christmas Eve.’

‘I hope you’re right. The trouble is, for all I know, he could have left me here deliberately. He said he had something to sort out.’ She was talking to herself again, thinking out loud. ‘Maybe he’s left me here because he knew I’d be safe. But why not just tell me? Oh, he can be so –’ She stopped suddenly. ‘Sarah, look!’

I turned. Underneath the door, smoke was creeping into the room.

‘See here, Doctor?’ Gregson’s enthusiasm was getting the better of him as he showed his visitor more and more of the site. ‘You can see where the burning is more prominent – the discolouration in the soil? Going by the plans of the house, the fire might have started when the hearth spilt its contents onto the rug.’

‘That would be consistent with what you have here,’ the Doctor said.

‘But aren’t hearths designed to stop that from happening?’

‘It’s the best theory we have Doctor. As you can see, the burning is quite severe – look here at these walls.’ Gregson scraped at the few centimetres of brick jutting out of the ground. ‘This side – the interior –

is almost entirely blackened. The wallpaper must have burnt off

completely, all around the ground floor. We can’t find any of it that

survived, on any of the brickwork.

‘The damage is strongest near the hearth – but we’ll need to

investigate this site a lot more before we know whether that signifies the fire’s origin, or simply that the family had a normal fire going, which fuelled the blaze.’ The Doctor was now walking around the

shallow trench. Gregson noted that he knew what he was doing, and

was being careful not to disturb the archaeology or step on any

uncovered areas.

‘But that’s not everything, is it, Professor?’ he said. ‘This is quite a big archaeological undertaking simply to investigate a house fire.

There must be hundreds of comparable examples you could be looking at.’

‘There are few so well preserved.’

‘Still,’ the Doctor said, suddenly turning and fixing Gregson with piercing eyes, ‘there’s more to this, isn’t there?’

Gregson sat down on the edge of the trench.

‘There’s more, yes,’ he said. ‘My team identified many possible sites for us to look at – we have to submit proposals to the money men, you see. Well, this one was included in the list assembled by one of my assistants, even though it looked relatively unremarkable. But when I read the list, the address sparked something in my mind. I grew up not far from here and remembered that, even before the house fire, this patch of Crawford Road had a rather unusual history.’

The Doctor sat next to him, and they both looked across the trench -

the ground floor of the house laid out in front of them in marks in the soil and small rows of brickwork sticking out of the soil.

‘What do you mean, unusual?’ he said.

‘When you look back over the history books,’ said Gregson, ‘there’s a series of fires. Probably been more than three dozen since the

fourteenth century – always on this site, always on or around 24

December. There have also been numerous deaths, some murders.

Illnesses too. Plague wiped out three whole families who lived here in the seventeenth century. Disaster after disaster. No wonder no one’s wanted to live here recently.’

‘I had no idea it was having such an effect...’ said the Doctor quietly.

‘What do you mean? You had no idea what was having an effect?’

‘I came here, to this precise location, because I detected something very dangerous. Something very dangerous indeed.’

Mel opened the door – the landing was filling with smoke, and we

could hear Father shouting up.

‘Sarah! Michael! Get down here!’

Quickly, Mel gathered Michael up in one arm, and grabbed my hand

with another. We raced down the stairs, holding our breaths, and found Mother and father in the hallway. Everywhere I looked, fire had taken hold – it was coming from under doors, and slowly creeping up the walls. The heat was painful, the sound deafening. Mother took Michael from Mel, and Father hugged me so tightly.

‘We’re trapped,’ said Mother. ‘I don’t know how it’s spread so

quickly.’

Other, than going back upstairs, we couldn’t see any way out of the house – fire was creeping in from every side. With his free arm, Father opened the door leading to the back room. ‘Here,’ he said. ‘It’s not so bad at the back of the house – head for the window.’ He pushed

Michael, Mother and Mel through the door, then me.

It was still he in the back room and the smoke was getting

everywhere. Father ran to the window, and struggled with the catch.

Mother screamed: ‘Look out, James!’

Father had just enough time to leap out of the way before part of the back room’s ceiling fell, fire raging through the hole from upstairs.

‘How did it spread up there so quickly?’ said Mel. ‘What’s going

on?’

The collapsed ceiling – all the floorboards and wreckage – was

blocking off the window. We were trapped, with no way of escape. I started to cry.

‘Where’s Michael?’ shouted Father. ‘Good God, Julia, where’s

Michael gone?’

‘He ran upstairs!’ Mel was at the door in a flash. ‘Michael!

Michael!’

Father shoved her out of the way, but she fought back, holding him in the room. ‘You won’t make it!’ she shouted. ‘The flames are

growing all the time. Hopefully he can climb out of his bedroom

window and get out.’

‘Let go of me, girl! I must try!’

But the fire continued to roar and, as we watched, it took hold on the stairs and the barrister and the wall.

Crying, Father shouted as loud as he could, ‘Michael! Get to a

window and climb down!’

‘What do you mean, dangerous?’ asked Gregson.

‘Something that shouldn’t be here.’ The Doctor stood up, wiping his trousers with his handkerchief ‘Something that shouldn’t be interfered with.’

Gregson looked at his watch. It would be dark soon, time to go

home. ‘Look, Doctor,’ he said. ‘I’m sorry I can’t be more help. And I hope you find your friend... but it’s time –’

‘Time for what?’ the Doctor asked probingly. ‘What do you have to run back to?’

‘I don’t understand..;

‘Professor Gregson, you’re here, working, on Christmas Day.’

‘I can see you’re very observant. What’s your point?’

‘Your dig will still be here tomorrow, the day after that, next week, next year if need be. There’s nothing so imperative that it would need

you to be here today, so that leads me to believe you have no family waiting at home, ready to tuck into Christmas dinner.'

Gregson bristled. 'That's a very sweeping assumption about –'

The Doctor quickly raised a hand in a placating gesture. 'I didn't mean to offend you, it's just that there's something not...'

'It's okay.' Gregson smiled sadly. 'You're right. I have nobody to go home to. It's the way I've always lived and, before you say anything, that's how I like it. But at Christmas, it always feels different. Like I'm missing something, a lost connection. Never been able to put my finger on it.'

'Until now,' asked the Doctor, leaning forward on his umbrella.

'Oh, I don't know,' said Gregson, starting to get flustered. 'There's something about this site that I find very calming. I've been on

countless digs, all over the world, and never in my career have I felt this strongly about somewhere.'

'Like a lost connection that's suddenly made again, perhaps.'

The two men locked eyes and Gregson felt a sudden, overwhelming

need to burst into tears, but a second later and the moment was gone as the Doctor moved quickly away.

Something had caught his eye, and Gregson watched him walk

quickly over to a patch of the dusty ground. He face was a mixture of expressions – confusion, shock, sadness, joy all battling for supremacy.

Gregson followed him. 'I wondered if you'd spot that. We

discovered it a few days ago. Odd, isn't it? It's baffled all of us, to be honest. Going by the floor plans, that was the back room of the house, overlooking the garden. And, there, right in the middle of the room, is this. We reckon it must have been made during the fire – the ground beneath it isn't as badly burnt as that around it. For a few moments, at least, as the fire raged, something protected the ground just here..: With the tip of his umbrella, the Doctor traced a perfect square

clearly marked out in the burnt ground.

I held on to Father's hand for dear life, squeezing it so hard. I could

hear Michael sobbing, Mother too.

Mel was trying to be brave, but I could see how scared she was.

She'd lost her friend tonight and was now going to die. She looked 91

down at me with such sadness in her face.

'Perhaps Father Christmas will save us,' I said.

'I hope so. Sarah.'

She then looked up – We could all hear a noise above the sound of the flames, a roar of a different kind. I couldn't believe my eyes as a large blue box started to appear in the middle of the room – the fire and the smoke seemed to more aside to make way for it. A light flashed brightly on and off on top of it.

'What is it?' asked Mother.

'It's Father Christmas!' said Mel, laughing.

After a moment, the noise died down and a door opened on the box –

a man appeared and quickly looked round. He saw us and told us to get inside. We didn't need asking again and, with the fire blazing around us, we stepped inside the box. I can't explain it, but the inside was a whole room – even bigger than our back room. It was white and cool and safe. Once we were inside, the man closed the door.

'Doctor!' said Mel, 'There's somebody out there. A little boy.

Michael.'

'There's nothing I can do, Mel!' This must have been her friend, I realised. 'It's beyond my control.' He talked frantically as he fiddled with dials and levers and buttons on the odd-looking structure in the middle of the room. 'This house was built on very shaky ground – it's sitting on top of a temporal volcano.'

'A what?' Mel shouted as the entire room lurched. Father caught me in his arms as I stumbled, but Mel and her friend had easily kept their footing.

'The earth below is literally bulging with temporal energy, anchored to this particular day across many centuries.' The room bucked again.

‘Which is a very dangerous thing to have in this dimension!’

‘What are you saying?’ said Father, still confused by what was going on. ‘A volcano?’

‘Of sorts,’ said Mel’s friend. ‘That’s what caused the fire, no doubt.

It’s also what sucked Mel into the past when we landed in Croydon in 1995. The TARDIS went walkabouts too, or so I’d thought. It was

actually in both years at the same time, see-sawing between the two time zones – it just took me a while to see it.’

‘Stop, Doctor!’ shouted Mel. ‘Look at me and listen. There’s still a little boy, maybe trapped in that house.’

‘I know, Mel,’ said the Doctor calmly. ‘But we’re trapped ourselves whilst the TARDIS is stuck. Think of it like being trapped on a larva flow, which is dictating our path. I could come back to 1935, but only once, and only for a moment. We can’t go back. It’s taking all the TARDIS’s energy to get us anywhere safely.’

He turned to Mother and Father.

‘Mr and Mrs Gregson, I’m so sorry, but to save your lives and your daughter’s, I’m afraid I’ve had to take you along the temporal larva flow too. I don’t know where – or, rather, when – it’ll take us. But I’m afraid, having lived in that house, on top of the temporal energy, you can never go back. It would kill you. I’m sorry.’

‘But what about our son?’ asked Father.

‘He survived the fire,’ said the Doctor. ‘And he lived a long, healthy life.’

‘How do you know that?’ I asked.

‘I’ve met him. One day, he will become an archaeologist and he’ll come home for Christmas.’

The Sommerton Fetch

Peter Anghelides

An Adventure of the Third Doctor, with Jo Grant

The abrupt jolt threw Jo Grant halfway across the TARDIS control

room, she caught her heel in the hens of her long pink dress, and fell headlong onto the hard floor.

The Doctor clung to the hexagonal control column at the centre of the chamber, and the room undulated about him. The TARDIS was like a bucking beast. Jo tolled helplessly and banged her head on the far wall. As suddenly as it had begun, the violence subsided, and the engine sound returned to its usual calm hum. The Doctor was

immediately at Jo's side.

When she tried to stand, everything seemed to swim around her.

'You may have concussion,' pondered the Doctor. 'Unless it's the

effect of that time twister.'

'What's a... time twister?'

'Primitive time technology, Jo. Clumsy, poorly designed, and badly driven. It leaves a trail of chronon decay through the time vortex, causing havoc for other time travellers.'

'Oh, I see.' Jo shook her head to try to clear it. 'Like a speedboat racing through a harbour and churning up the water.'

'Yes, I suppose so. Very good.' The Doctor smiled and helped her to stand. 'You could say we rode straight across its wake. And now we've tracked it down.'

'No wonder I feel seasick.' Jo leaned against the TARDIS control

column. 'So who's driving this spaceboat?'

The Doctor showed her an image on the display. 'They were popular with reckless youngsters gadding about in early twenty-third-century time travel.' He rummaged around in a cupboard for a rubber torch.

'As you can imagine, the Time Lords disapprove, and for once I agree with them. This twister will be no different. Some young buck with more money than sense, out for fun but unaware of what damage he's wreaking.'

‘You sound like my dad, when my uncle bought me my first car as a Christmas present.’

‘I doubt very much that your first car could punch a hole through the fabric of space-time, Jo.’

She grinned. ‘It was a banger. It could barely punch its way into fourth gear.’ Jo gripped the console, excited at the prospect of a new adventure. ‘So, we’re going to track down this twister and revoke his license, right?’

The Doctor patted her on the arm. ‘I’m going to find him, Jo. You’re going to stay here and recover from that nasty fall: He swirled his cape onto his shoulders and made for the exit doors. ‘You can read about where we are in the TARDIS history log. I’ve set it up so you can keep busy. I won’t be long.’

The doors had closed behind him before Jo had a chance to protest.

The Doctor leaned into the wind as it whipped snow across the twilight parkland. He had tracked the time twister’s path to this estate near Shrewsbury in 1783, though in its familiarly unhelpful way the

TARDIS had decided not to land in exactly the same spot. The square red profile of a mid-eighteenth-century country house loomed on the horizon.

The cube-shaped time tracer in his hand showed a strong signal. The Doctor picked his way cautiously across a muddy kitchen garden. He clicked off the torch. Electronics would be hard to explain to the locals.

He practised his cover story as he approached; he was a doctor from Worcestershire whose horse had thrown a shoe. He pondered whether he should try an accent.

A shriek of terror cut through the dusk, Abandoning his rehearsal, the Doctor raced towards the nearest door.

The kitchen felt cold. The smell of a lamb casserole lingered, and a few cheap plates and a tangled pile of cutlery were stacked by the sink.

Sprawled across the freshly scrubbed floor was a scullery maid. A pan

of hot water had spilled beside her. The body still felt warm, but the young woman's sightless eyes stared up at some nameless final horror.

There was a clatter from the cast-iron range beside the warming

cupboards. The time tracer flashed at maximum. The Doctor aimed his torch into a dark corner.

A figure twisted its head towards him. It looked bizarrely like a speed skater dressed in a greyish silver tunic that reflected the Doctor's torchlight directly back. The slim humanoid's bodysuit was quite out of place in the late eighteenth century.

It recovered its poise more quickly than the Doctor, scrambled from its hiding place by the pantry door, and fled through the nearest door.

The Doctor scurried after it. The kitchen stairs led up into the

mansion's main reception area. Double doors across the hallway

opened into a larger room, where a stout butler gave imperious

directions to a couple of bruise staff. A red-haired lad held a rickety set of wooden steps beneath a huge ornate chandelier, and at the top his dark-haired counterpart struggled to attach a bough of mistletoe to the candleholders. 'Come on, you wretches,' yelled the butler, 'or you'll not be getting home before midnight, Christmas Eve or no Christmas Eve.'

'Yes, Mr Kavanaugh,' muttered the redhead.

The trim silver-grey figure had somehow managed to creep past the butler and was quietly sneaking up the stairs.

'Her ladyship will be returning to the house tomorrow morning, and you've barely started on the decorations!' Kavanaugh was shouting.

'Now get on with it, while I find out what that silly girl Jane was screaming about in the kitchens.'

The Doctor froze. He was about to come face to face with an angry butler, and lose track of his own quarry. He reckoned he could outpace this tubby duffer. So he stepped decisively out from the concealment of the cold kitchen stairwell just before the butler could confront him.

‘Do excuse me,’ the Doctor told him with forced civility. Before the man could react. the Doctor hared across the hallway and away up the stairs.

‘Robin! George! Stop him!’ the butler bellowed at his juniors. After a moment’s hesitation, he hurried down the kitchen stairs.

The red-haired lad, Robin, gaped at the Doctor in startled

amazement. The boy stepped through the great hall’s double doors, then realised too late that he’d abandoned the wooden steps. George was left dangling from the chandelier as his support vanished. The Doctor was already at the top of the main stairs as he heard the step ladders finally collapse. The Doctor’s time tracer was ablaze. Its iridescent light rippled eerily over the gloomy upper lauding,

illuminating framed etchings and a Roubiliac terracotta bust on a rosewood side table.

The strange humanoid must have hidden in one of the bedrooms. In

the corner of the third that the Doctor checked, the silver-grey figure stood calmly by the calved upright of a four-poster bed, as though waiting for him. The pale fine was encircled by the glossy material of its hood.

The Doctor’s time tracer was a frenzy of lights. He concealed it

beneath his cape again, and confronted the slim figure. ‘Why, you’re only a child...’ But in the half-light from the nearby window, he could see that the teenager’s eyes were looking past him.

‘Stand where you are!’ barked Mr Kavanaugh, framed ln the

doorway. The portly man had almost exhausted himself running up the stairs, and now aimed both barrels of a revolving flintlock pistol at the Doctor. The gloaming light reflected fleetingly off the heavily

embossed weapon as it wavered in his trembling hands. Kavanaugh

licked his lips nervously. ‘What is your business here?’

The Doctor raised a calming hand. ‘Steady on, old chap.’

The butler quivered with barely suppressed rage. Even in the halflight,

his face was purpling. ‘The constabulary will be informed. I found poor Jane in the kitchen. No, sir, do not deny it. You shall hang for this.’

The Doctor interrupted him softly. ‘I don’t mean you any harm...’

His further comments were forestalled by the rattling of a casement latch. The teenager had flung open the first-floor window and stepped outside.

‘No!’ shouted the Doctor, but the slim shape had already slipped

from the sill. There was a shrill cry, the thud of feet on the driveway, and a high-pitched wail. Before the Doctor had time to react, the devastating boom of the pistol filled the bedroom. The pellet whipped through his cape, and the thick walnut door ofa Louis XVI armoire splintered beside him.

He dropped instinctively into the ushiro-sankaku ready stance. The butler was still reacting to the pistol’s brutal recoil, so the Doctor plucked the rubber torch from his jacket pocket and flicked it on. His opponent uttered a cry of surprise, and flung up a hand to protect his eyes. The Doctor sprang post the startled servant, his cape flapping.

The Doctor skidded to a halt on a Bakiashayesh rug. Halfway up the main staircase stood the two serving lads. Red-haired Robin gripped a long kitchen knife; George cut a more forlorn figure, clutching a sprig of mistletoe. Nevertheless, they completely blocked the Doctor’s exit.

Behind him he could hear the click of the flintlock pistol being

cocked. The Doctor swept his cape around him, and swung his lanky legs over the banister. With a Venusian aikido cry, he slid right past the frozen junior staff, down the whole of the staircase into the hallway.

His boots skittered on the parquet flooring, but he swiftly regained his balance and hared through the main doorway and out into the dying evening.

His boots squelched in the sleety mush of the driveway. A fast scan of the surrounding area with his torch revealed a flash of reflected silver in the middle distance. The strangely dressed youngster was limping towards the stables. The Doctor loped off its pursuit.

At the stable block, the Doctor’s quarry struggled with the latch.

What was he hoping to do – commandeer a horse and race off into the 97

night? The Doctor hurried inside. A piebald mare startled in a nearby stall, its nostrils flaring, its long mane flapping as the head jerked fearfully aside. A coruscating sequence of lights filled the hayloft above the unkempt stall, and a rising hum began to vibrate the

woodwork. The very air seemed to ripple around the Doctor as a time twister powered into life.

In the eye of the storm, the youngster grinned down from the top of an access ladder. But the grin vanished as the Doctor vaulted up the ladder and threw himself bodily over a bale of straw.

'Oh, no, you don't, young feller me lad!' The Doctor's shoulder

caught the silver-grey figure squarely in the midriff, and they both tumbled away from the time twister machinery and into the smelly, stalk-strewn floor of the hayloft. The youngster gave a shrill cry of anger or pain or disbelief. Then the vortex waxed and eddied and

swirled around the pair. And consumed them both.

A full and particular Account of a Spiritual Apparition, otherwise known as the Ghost of Sommerton Manor. Witnessed in the absence of the Lord of the Manor, by three honest Men; namely Jonathan Kavanaugh, Robin Greenton and George Wells. The Apparition taking place on Christmas Eve last; with the Particulars of the extraordinary and horrific Events which took place that evening, including the Awful Death of a serving girl.

Shrewsbury Chronicle, *Thursday 8 January 1781*

He noticed the oak-beamed ceiling first. A glance at the carpet by his head revealed it was more Axminster than Bakhshayesh. A late

twentieth-century house, then, if the bedroom's preponderance of

Laura Ashley fabric was any indication. The Doctor smoothed over the carpet pile, but he couldn't feel it. Still numb from the unorthodox journey, he supposed. In the distance, carollers sang *The Twelve Days of Christmas*.

The Doctor sat up, allowing the Meissen figurines on the dresser to come into focus. The waves of nausea subsided. He'd not suffered the raw effect of the vortex like that since a foolish experiment back at the

Academy. Beyond a stripped pine bed frame, the strangely dressed

teenager sobbed quietly. The Doctor shuffled over. ‘Are you all right?’

‘What do you think?’ snapped the youngster, and tugged at the

silver-grey hood.

The Doctor was amazed to see long blonde hair cascade over the

teenager’s shoulders. She was just a girl, he reflected, about the same age as Jo.

‘I’ve wrenched my ankle,’ blubbed the girl. ‘My twister’s abandoned

in seventeen hundred and who-knows-what, thanks to you. First time out as well. And it was a gift...’ She favoured him with a glare and another tearful, snotty inhalation.

‘A present from your uncle, no doubt,’ the Doctor said to himself.

‘An early present from my mum, if you must know. Because she

can’t get time of work for Christmas this year. Not that it’s any of your business,’ she grumbled. ‘Oh, no one should ever see me in this get-up.’

The Doctor cleared his throat awkwardly. ‘I think it looks very...

fetching.’

‘No, stupid,’ snapped the girl. ‘The KrystalFlex suit’s supposed to make me invisible to you locals. Unless you get really close to it, anyway. Like now, eww, keep away! I hope Mum kept the receipt,

because she’s so gonna want her money back on this pile of crud.’

The Doctor studied the girl’s angry. tear-streaked face. ‘What’s your name, my dear?’

‘Casimer,’ she snarled. ‘My friends call me Caz. So you should call me Casimer. Anyway, what’s it to you?’ Her head snapped up at a

sound from beyond the bedroom door. A couple were arguing on the

landing.

‘Jonathan, it’s Christmas Eve, for God’s sake! You can take the

afternoon off surely? You know Zak wants you to see him…’ The

woman’s voice penetrated into the room.

‘It’s a big order. I have to get back to the office.’ Her husband’s voice was plaintive. ‘Carlos will be there…’

‘Oh, it’s always Carlos, isn’t it? Why didn’t you marry Carlos, eh?

Because Carlos wouldn’t have put up all these decorations, would he?

Or written all the Christmas cards to your relatives.’

‘Meredith, that’s not fair. I took Zak to see Father Christmas.’

‘At your works’ event! You are so predictable…’

Casimer struggled to her feet. The Doctor motioned for her to stay quiet and avoid alerting the squabbling parents.

‘Meredith, maybe what you need is a reiki massage…’

‘Jonathan, maybe what you need is a kick in the…’

Casimer pulled up her silver-grey hood and tucked her hair back

inside it. She moved stealthily to the bedroom door – just as it burst open to admit a furious-looking woman in a crumpled kimono and

frazzled auburn hair. ‘If you just can’t be bothered to attend your son’s nativity performance, why not just come out and say… whaaaaaaaa!’

When Meredith caught sight of the intrusion, she unleashed a

screech that rattled the Meissen. Seizing this opportunity, Casimer slipped past the woman and her equally startled husband, and down the stairs.

The Doctor raised his hands, struggled for appropriate words, gave up the effort, and swished past after the mysterious young girl with an apologetic shrug. Jonathan regained his composure enough to lunge after the Doctor as he passed, but only ended up raking his nails down the handmade wallpaper.

In the hall below was a boy of about eight, presumably the

disappointed Zak. He opened the front door to a group of carol singers, whose performance demonstrated how pleased they were to have

reached the eleventh day of Christmas. Grey-suited Casimer dashed at the doorframe, and slipped through what seemed an impossibly small opening. The singers continued their lively two-part harmony

uninterrupted: ‘And a partridge in a pear treeeee!’

The Doctor flew down the stairs. Jonathan clumped down after him, accompanied by his wife’s continued shrieking and a trail of Christmas decorations snagged in his hair. When the Doctor paused by the

doorway, Jonathan took his chance to pounce – but somehow,

impossibly, missed. He collided instead with a glass-and-metal hall table, and spilled a bone-china crib scene onto the laminate flooring with a spectacular, shattering crash. Jonathan lay dazed amid the scraps of straw and shards of broken porcelain like scattered snow.

The carol singers had so far remained unfazed, perhaps familiar with no end of bizarre behaviour in their charitable tour of this area. But as the Doctor loomed at them through the doorway, his cape flapping

around him, they suddenly faltered on ‘Ten Lords a-leaping’. One of them gawped, and dropped his festive lantern. The other stumbled

aside, aghast, trailing her faux Victorian gown. The Doctor bounced off the doorstep and through the fresh gap.

The fleeing girl had reached the end of the long gravel driveway, still hampered by her injured leg. The Doctor was gaining on her in the fresh afternoon air, and had time to glance around. It was clear from the commotion at the doorway of the handsome stables conversion that Jonathan’s pursuit had degenerated into a bewildered argument with his squawking wife and the appalled carol singers.

A prancing reindeer, picked out in neon, galloped back and forth

across the fake lych-gate that dominated the foot of the drive. The Doctor fled through the gate, looking around wildly for the girL

The suburban street was lined with new houses, each vying to outdo

its neighbours with a display of glittering icicle lights, Christmas lanterns, or illuminated signs demanding ‘Santa, stop here!’ Children in bright coats and warm scarves chased over the front lawns.

Casimer had made it across the carriageway, hobbling past a sign

that said ‘Manor Road’. She glanced up and saw the Doctor. Her

expression was tired, defeated. Nevertheless, she started to limp away
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along the pavement.

Determined not to allow her to escape, the Doctor stepped out into the roadway. One of the nearby children screamed and pointed. The Doctor jerked his head around, and saw a Royal Mail van bearing

down on him. He barely had time to raise his hands in a futile attempt to ward it off before it struck him.

Or rather, it reached him. He saw the grille on the bonnet touch his body, and then continue through it. The horrified driver wrestled with the wheel in an impossible attempt to avoid the collision, and his Might orange jacket loomed larger in the Doctor’s vision. The Doctor’s face breached the dirt-streaked windscreen, then the driver’s face. The vehicle began to swerve as the driver struggled with the steering, and the Doctor watched the passenger seat slide by. Now he was in the parcel compartment, up to his waist in Christmas mailbags but with his feet still on the road surface. The van continued its skid, and the Doctor melted effortlessly through the side of the vehicle and back into the afternoon daylight.

Behind him, the van mounted the pavement and careered across a

driveway where it struck a parked Range Rover side-on and came to a shuddering halt. The ululating wail of the car alarm filled the air.

Casimer had stopped to watch the accident in appalled disbelief. Her pale face was even more ashen.

Around her, the swirling chaos of space-time began to reassert itself.

The Doctor shook himself from his immobility, and raced over to

her. Children and parents yelled, screamed, pointed from further along the pavement. Then the vortex began to exert its familiar force,

like a hook tugging at him between his hearts, and the world dissolved

around him again.

And finally, a ghost story for Christmas. Residents of the Sommerton homing estate in Shrewsbury claim to have experienced a rather unusual festive spirit today. For more news on things that went bump in the afternoon, we sent our fearless reporter, Martin Ferdinand, to investigate.

News Report, BBC Radio Shropshire, Saturday 24 December 1993

His room was to remain unchanged. That had been Eudora's first

decision, the moment news of George's death had reached her.

Eudora had dreaded her son's departure for the Crimea. He had

chosen the Royal Fusiliers for their gallant deeds under Lord

Wellington in the peninsula, and because *The Times* published so many thrilling accounts of military engagements at the seat of war on the Danube.

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She could not advise him of her premonition, for fear of dimming

that eager light of valour in his proud eyes. She had remained stoic as George saluted her and boarded the steamer for Malta, while the band played *Cheer Boys Cheer* and *The Girl I Left Behind Me*.

Hers was no trivial presentiment. She had dreamed of Varna, of her son's final illness, long before the steamer had sailed, months before the cholera took him. She had dared mention it only once to William, but he had huffed and shaken his breakfast *Times* and changed the topic of conversation.

That was her husband's way of coping. Hers was to leave George's

room untouched by the passing months, unaffected even by this festive season. She had instructed the servants to decorate the rest of the Manor for Christmas as usual. They had laced fragrant boughs with golden baubles, and strung the mantle with garlands of laurel and myrtle to frame a glowing fire of crackling pinecones. Eudora herself had displayed the family Bible on the chestnut side table, opened to Matthew I, 18-25. As she had walked to George's room this

evening, the house was redolent of pine and hemlock, the scent of sweet spices, cinnamon and tangerine.

Here in George's room, there was no festivity. Today's special

visitor knew that. William did not approve of Mr Wrighton, suffering the medium's presence for the sake of his American wife's modem

sensibilities. Across the circular table from Eudora, in the flickering candlelight, her husband had closed his eyes, ostensibly to concentrate, though she suspected he was dozing. William did not believe the

seance meant anything, but bore it with ill-disguised distaste and an unspoken resentment at the cost. At least she had persuaded him to leave his *Times* out in the hallway, and not to bring it into the room as a distraction.

Mr Wrighton's palm felt sweaty. Eudora allowed the medium to

stroke her knuckles gently with his thumb as he uttered the mystical words of incantation through his straggly beard. Summoning the

spirits. Contacting her lost son. Helping her to make her peace with him and obtain his forgiveness.

A low hissing sound began to fill the room, as though a window had been left ajar. In the improbable breeze, the tinted silk of the

antimacassar on her chair lifted gently and flapped against her bare shoulder. Eudora could see her own shadow cast starkly across the table's cherrywood surface. A light from behind her illuminated her husband's face now, and he opened his eyes irritably. His stem

expression evaporated into bewilderment.

'What is it, my dear?' she asked him.

Mr Wrighton's closed eyelids fluttered. He bade her gently to remain
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silent

She persisted. 'Is it George? Is it my darling boy?' She knew the strictures placed upon her and William by Mr Wrighton. They should not break the circle. They should not speak. They should not rise from their place at the table. But the noise and ilhrmination from behind

her was simply too much to bear.

A whirling ball of light spiralled by the doorway. The tapestry on the wall rippled in a waft of air, animating the Archangel Gabriel's woven wings.

Eudora lifted her hand to her mouth with an 'Oh!' of surprise.

Another winged figure raked the room with a look, spread its arms, stepped backwards and vanished through the solid oak door.

Eudora's heart pounded. William had half-risen from his chair,

looking with considerably more respect at Mr Wrighton.

Mr Wrighton, however, leapt up so quickly that he overturned his

heavy, banister-backed chair. The medium stood beyond it, pressing his spine to the bookcase and a shabby handkerchief to his mouth, terror in his eyes.

'Get off me!' Casimer struggled in the Doctor's grip. 'That hurts!'

'Nothing else hurts, though, does it?' The Doctor studied the

mansion's upper hallway. 'You can feel me holding your arm. But you didn't feel this door that I dragged us straight through. You can't feel this carpet beneath our feet. You can't tell how warm or cold this house is.' He pressed his free hand against a copy of *The Times* that lay on a low table beside them. His hand sank through the newsprint, through the table, and out the other side. 'I thought the numbness was an after-effect of the vortex, but look.' He indicated the newspaper. 'We're in 1864. A moment ago, I escaped what should have been a fatal accident in the late twentieth century.'

The bedroom door through which he had dragged them was creaking

open. The Doctor tugged the protesting Casimer after him, and they slid silently and painlessly through the opposite wall.

They were now in another bedroom. 'It's as though we're not fully here...' began the Doctor.

As though to disprove this, a maid who had been quietly dusting an escritoire by the window let out a frantic yelp of fright. The Doctor groaned, and gestured to Casimer that they should move on. Casimer narrowed her eyes, but accompanied him as they waded their way

waist-high through the four-poster bed to the far wall.

This next bedroom was unoccupied. The faint screams of the maid still filtered through the wall. ‘We should move on,’ suggested Casimer. ‘She’ll tell them which way we went.’

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The girl closed her eyes and impressed the Doctor by slowly descending through the bedroom floor. He concentrated and followed her The floor rose to meet him, and his head sank through the carpet, the floorboards, the joists. Once through the plaster of the downstairs ceiling, he could see the silver filigree and glasswork of the great hall’s chandelier. His legs dangled disconcertingly in mid air.

They continued in this manner through several more rooms, eventually stopping to hide in the kitchen. The Doctor saw that the range was new, but the old warming cupboards and pantry were familiar. ‘This is where we first met, Casimer. Nearly a century ago.’

The floor was scrubbed and clean. ‘The dead body is long gone, though,’ he added tactlessly.

‘I was only looking for food. I was so hungry. I still am.’ Casimer looked like she might weep. ‘This suit is supposed to disguise me. But the maid bumped into me, and saw me, and screamed, and then just collapsed. I didn’t harm her, I really didn’t.’

Her forlorn expression softened the Doctor’s attitude. ‘Possibly died of fright, poor girl. Back then, we could touch things. Now we cannot.’

Casimer slapped his arm. ‘So how come I can touch you, then? You’re from the past.’

‘No more than you are, my dear. And that gleaming suit of yours – these people must think you’re a ghost.’

‘Oh, yeah?’ sneered Casimer. ‘And what about your get-up? You’re

telling me you're not from the eighteenth century?'

'With a torch? And this time tracer?' The Doctor waggled the

devices at her. He saw she was still studying the ensemble he'd bought from Turnbull & Asser: smoking jacket, ruffled shirt, the cape lined with white silk. 'What's wrong with these clothes?'

'Nothing,' smiled Casimer. 'They're very... fetch-like?'

'Fetching,' the Doctor corrected her, and smiled. 'Well,' he added briskly, 'it's clear that we're repeatedly visiting the same location. That twentieth-century house would be part of a housing estate built around this area, probably a future conversion of those stables where you hid your time twister...'

This untimely reminder saw Casimer's good humour disperse

instantly. She began to berate the Doctor for his interference – for the crash of her time twister, for her hunger, for pursuing her, for keeping her from her parents at Christmas...

Her tirade was interrupted by a clatter from the kitchen stairwell.

'Oh, my Lord,' said a woman's soft voice.

At the foot of the stairs stood the lady they had seen briefly in the seance. She stared in wonderment, marvelling at the scene in her

kitchen. 'Speak to me, kind spirit! Have you a message from my boy?

News of my poor George from beyond the veil? I miss him so this

Christmas...'

The Doctor watched Casimer's face twist in surprise and confusion, and caught his breath as a familiar tug clutched at his hearts. He stepped swiftly towards Casimer, and the vortex swallowed them

again.

A rare nineteenth-century letter written to Chester A. Arthur, later the twenty first President of the United States. Dated 18 January 1865, the letter was written by Lord William Deverington of Shrewsbury, England, and discusses the birth of Arthur's second son, a ghostly apparition at a

seance in Deverington's country home, and American transport policy.

Auction catalogue, Tennison Auction Co., 29 October 1974.

'Can they see us, Doctor?'

'I'm sure we're not disturbing them, Caz. How's your leg?'

'Still sore. Doesn't hurt as much as my stomach. I'm starving. Can we stay here for a while, before we try again?'

They sat at the far end of the room, hoping to remain unnoticed by the staff and patients by perching discreetly on a sagging green-striped mattress. It was the only bed in the ward stripped of its sheets and blankets. The fruit bowl atop the chipped Formica of the adjacent cabinet suggested to the Doctor that the patient had only recently departed.

Other beds stretched off into the distance, drab containers of grey-haired, grey-faced figures. Sleeping occupants hardly lifted their bedcovers with each shallow breath. Other patients were mute

witnesses to their visitors' half-hearted conversations.

Sommerton Manor's magnificent chandelier was dull and

cobwebbed now. The staff had made desultory efforts to provide

festive decorations for the lower parts of the great hall – glued paper chains and twists of crêpe paper, plastic reindeer attached with Blu-Tack and string to the picture rail above the chipped plaster walls. A squinting angel straddled a moulting pine tree.

'It's a hospital again,' observed Casimer.

'But different from that sanatorium after the First World War,'

explained the Doctor. 'Hmm. Was that before or after it was a dance palace?'

'What is a "disco inferno"?' Casimer asked him.

'You're asking the wrong person, Caz. Ask Jo when we get back.'

He saw Casimer's face was sad again. He surreptitiously consulted his time tracer. 'It's 1973 now. Looks like the manor has been converted into a cottage hospital. It's falling apart. Getting a bit old itself.'

‘Not as old as you, eh?’

‘Cheeky.’ The Doctor smiled, encouraged by his young companion’s

fresh attempt at humour. ‘This is obviously a long-stay ward for older patients. Look down there...’

He gestured to a bed halfway down the hall. A middle-aged visitor sat awkwardly, flanked by two boisterous children. The man opened a Christmas card for the patient in the bed, and poured water from a jug.

His voice was just too loud and bright to sound entirely sincere.

‘He’ll be carrying out his filial duty,’ explained the Doctor. ‘Visiting his father in hospital before Christmas. Those squabbling kids probably wonder why they can’t go back to the car. They don’t want to be here.

Their father doesn’t want to be here. I doubt the grandfather wants to be here either, assuming he knows where he is...’

He stopped because he noticed that Casimer was crying softly again.

‘I’m sorry, my dear.’

‘I just want to be with my parents for Christmas,’ she whispered

through the tears. She reached out to the cabinet and grasped at a banana in the bowl; her fingers passed straight through the fruit.

‘Instead, I’m going to die of starvation, hundreds of years before I was even born.’

The Doctor put a reassuring hand on her shoulder. ‘Try to remember what I told you, Caz. We cannot directly interact with our location. The twister’s in a different time zone and we’re not stabilised corporeally.

These abrupt trips through the vortex happen whenever you get

emotional, and our destination latches on to other people’s strong feelings. You’re linked to the time twister, but physically separated from it...’

‘Thanks to you!’

‘Yes, thanks to me. And with my help, you can control these jumps through time and get back to it. Let’s focus on the positive.’ A thought struck him. ‘Why, that’s it!’

She eyed him wearily. ‘What do you mean?’

They were interrupted by a cry from a stout, pink-checked nurse.

‘Excuse me! What are you doing here? I don’t remember signing you in to the ward…’ She started to walk towards them. ‘No don’t ignore me, come back here!’

The Doctor rolled his eyes. Casimer nodded her own weary

acknowledgement. Together they stood up, strolled over to the nearest wall, and walked through it. On the other side was an unoccupied

study, filled with stacks of paper and old office equipment. He could just hear the shout of anger and surprise from the nurse. The Doctor stuck his head back through the wall and waggled his eyebrows. The nurse’s face whitened and she let out a brittle scream. Further down the 106

ward, two old men startled awake in their beds, and the middle-aged man dropped his jug of water.

Casimer dragged him back through the wall. ‘Stop teasing them,’ she chastised.

The Doctor was pleased to see she was smiling, though. It was when Car got upset that the effects of the time twister took hold and whisked them off to some other random date. He could not risk losing her, or he’d never get back to 1783 and the TARDIS. And Jo.

‘Let’s try again,’ he agreed. He took Casimer’s hand. ‘Focus on the positive, remember? Come on! It’s Christmas.’ The Doctor jerked his head dismissively at the bent silver tree that slumped on a filing cabinet beside them. ‘It’s not about these trinkets. Decorations and crackers, mistletoe and mulled wine, chestnuts roasting and plum duff… that’s just the ephemera. Christmas is about something more profound and personal. I should have recognised that. It’s the real reason that man is visiting his father in this hospital. Why he brought his ungrateful children. It’s about family and friendship. Commitment and love.’

He squeezed her palm softly again, and covertly crossed the fingers of

his other hand.

Casimer smiled at him. ‘I think I’m ready to go home now.’

‘She seemed nice,’ said Jo. She watched the Doctor cram the

dismantled remains of the time twister into an old tea chest. ‘And her parents were glad to see her when we dropped her off… when was it?’

‘The year 2212. Safely home for Christmas with her family in New

Wroxeter, in the City State of Amwythig. What you call Shrewsbury, Jo.’ He shoved the chest into a TARDIS cupboard, and dusted off his hands in satisfaction. ‘Once we concentrated on our happy place, we could control our jumps through the vortex and back to this infernal contraption. Fortunately, Casimer had powerful feelings for home and family. I bet she was ready for her Christmas dinner.’

‘Where was your happy place, Doctor?’

He smiled at her. ‘Here in the TARDIS, of course. With you, Jo.’

‘I’m flattered.’

‘Though I’m not sure her father was grateful. For him, Caz had

hardly been absent, and I was like a policeman delivering an underage drinker. He gave me a bit of a funny look, don’t you think?’

Jo laughed. ‘Like I told you, Doctor – sometimes, you sound like my dad.’

‘So you did, Jo! That feels like well over a week ago.’

Jo shook her head. ‘I still haven’t got the hang of this time-travel lark. Caz said you’d been bouncing around for days, but it was only a couple of hours for me.’

‘Plenty enough time for her to scare dozens of people with her

ghastly wailing.’

‘Was she pretending to be a ghost?’

‘No,’ admitted the Doctor. ‘But she was doing a lot of grumbling.

And I suppose that faulty KristalFlex suit of hers would seem quite ghostly...' He was aware that Jo was chuckling to herself. 'What is it?'

'Look.' Jo led him by the elbow to the TARDIS console. 'I took

your advice when you ran off without me. Read about this location, in the TARDIS history log. There's bags of fascinating stuff – newspaper stories, a letter to the American President, some files from a wartime sanatorium and a cottage hospital. I even saw some TV news from the future. And what do you notice about them, Doctor?'

The Doctor studied the display.

'There are many sightings of this famous local apparition over the years,' Jo explained. 'But it's never a young girl, Doctor. It's a man they describe. "Something of a dandy," see? "A tall figure with a young-old face and a mane of prematurely white hair". Who does that sound like?'

'Good grief,' The Doctor rubbed his chin thoughtfully. 'Well, she did say I looked fetch-like!'

'What?'

'A fetch is a wraith, Jo. The disembodied ghost of a living person.'

He threw back his cape and stood before her, his arms akimbo. 'May I introduce myself, Miss Grant? You've heard of me, of course. I'm the Sommerton Fetch!'

Christmas Present

'I am the Ghost of Christmas Present,' said the Spirit.

'Look upon me!'

– *A Christmas Carol*, Charles Dickens

Faithful Friends: Part Two

Cavan Scott & Mark Wright

An Adventure of the Brigadier

The cursor scrolled down the page of the document as Alistair Gordon Lethbridge-Stewart let out a long and heart-felt sigh. Just one more page and the festivities could begin.

Doris, of course, had been right. But then, wasn't she always? It really wasn't fair on her that today of all days he was in his study, poring over UN files, when he should be downstairs performing his duty as man of the house and sharpening the knife ready to plunge into the breast of the goose. Unfortunately for the Lethbridge-Stewart Christmas dinner, that wasn't the only knife currently being sharpened.

There would be no break for stuffing, crackers and paper hats at

Whitehall, and if UNIT couldn't provide proper account of the last poor excuse for a mission, there'd be no happy New Year for anybody and Geneva would pull the plug quicker than you could say 'God rest ye, merry gentlemen'. And wouldn't the swine at C4 just love that?

No, all paperwork needed to be signed, sealed and delivered with no margin for error and no excuse for UNIT's detractors to build their moral high ground into the stratosphere.

It was all so easy in the old days, simpler. There was the occasional stuffed-shirt civil servant to deal with from time to time, of course, but they always knew who the enemy was, who to fire at, who to negotiate with. You never saw a Silurian stomping through the door in a

pinstripe suit, waving a cease-and-desist order. Although now he came to think of it, the image was rather amusing.

The last paragraphs of the dossier centred on the screen and, taking a sip from his glass of malt, the Brigadier checked the final wording of the report. The amber liquid left a pleasant burning sensation in the back of his throat. He smiled. Good old Bell, never forgot. Unlike some...

'I thought you'd retired?'

The Brigadier swung around on his chair, ancient leather creaking 110

under what, these days, seemed to be even older bones and glanced at the man standing in the doorway.

'Ah, Henry, erm...'

Henry Lethbridge-Stewart took a sip from the rather fine-looking gin and tonic in his hand. The Brigadier had never been entirely

comfortable with his nephew – didn't know him all that well – but family was family. 'I was just running an eye over this report. Bambera needed a second... but, you don't need to know that. I won't be much longer, I promise.'

'Doris sent me to get you. She says the gravy needs stirring.' He furrowed his brow. 'She said something about five pints rapid.

Whatever that means.'

The Brigadier smiled at what had become a shared joke with his

wife. 'Tell Mrs Lethbridge-Stewart I'll report for kitchen duty in two minutes.'

Henry grinned. 'I'd make it quicker if I were you. Next time, I'm sending Julius up for you.'

Henry raised his glass to the Brigadier and left him to it. Well, that does it, he thought. The former head of UNIT would rather be staring down the business end of a Skarasen than face his seven-year-old

great-nephew all by himself. It wasn't that the boy was obnoxious but... actually that's exactly what it was. Okay, Alistair, time to shut up shop for Christmas. Sharp eyes, in no way diminished by the passing of rime, re-read that last sentence once again and, when he was

satisfied that the report was watertight, the Brigadier reached for the mouse. He clicked down on the right-hand button of the device,

suddenly missing the days when a signature consisted of ink on paper, and highlighted the 'finish and save' option on the pull-down menu. A box appeared in the middle of the screen, displaying the legend 'Digital signature – Brigadier Alistair Lethbridge-Stewart (R)', before another prompt asked him to confirm that he wanted to submit the final draft of the report. He chose the affirmative and the laptop beeped to inform him that the document had been saved, time-stamped and was being

beamed, or whatever they called it, back to UNIT HQ. Satisfied, he flicked the screen of the PC down over the keyboard, letting his fingers brush for a second against the embossed logo on its casing. He

took a final swig of the whisky and then pushed himself up from the desk.

Let battle commence.

The sounds of Bing Crosby wafted out of the kitchen alongside the warm, comfortable smell of a roast prepared with love and affection as the Brigadier reached the bottom of the stairs. He paused for a second as Julius tore across his path, wielding his Power Ranger stun-blaster, 111

recently liberated from its wrapping beneath the tree. The Brigadier looked round suspiciously for Julius's younger sister, and Lord alone knows where Henry's wife, Olivia, had got to.

He made a dash for the front room while the coast was clear. Perhaps another wee dram was in order. Even after all these years, he couldn't quite get his old warhorse head around these family Christmases. But Doris did love them so...

'Uncle Ally, you've decided to join us,' said Henry from where he was uncorking a bottle of red by the table. The Brigadier thought about asking him to stop calling 'Uncle Ally' but thought better of it. He could hear Doris bustling about in the kitchen and wished she'd come and save him. 'I did say I'd only be two minutes. A soldier's word is his bond.'

'But you're not a soldier any more, are you?'

The Brigadier glared at Henry, but thought better of the thunderous response he was about to make. Doris would never forgive him.

'Hmm, yes, I suppose you're right,' he mumbled, and stepped past

Henry to the decanter of whisky. He poured a healthy measure and

turned to survey the room.

The table was already laid, festooned with red and green napkins and arranged around a Yule log complete with plastic robin. Six places, all ready to be filled by a ravenous contingent of...

Six places.

The Brigadier stiffened.

'There are only six places set for dinner.'

Henry stopped pouring himself a glass of the red – which was a

rather fine merlot, if he remembered correctly. ‘Of course,’ Henry said.

‘There are six of us. You, Doris, me, Olivia and the kids. Who else...’

He stopped. ‘Oh. This again. You tried this trick when we were here three years ago.’

‘I’m laying another place.’ The Brigadier resolutely stomped over to the chest of drawers in the corner of the room, pulled open a drawer and pulled cutlery and a place mat out He walked back to the table and started bunching the plates along the table to make room. The legs of the spare chair scraped across the polished floorboards.

‘Haven’t gone back on my word for thirty years and I’m not going to start now,’ he mumbled to himself. Henry was looking at him,

bemused. Wouldn’t expect him to understand.

The Brigadier stepped back to admire his handiwork, giving the

napkin one final twist. ‘Perfect!’ he said, suddenly the weight of the day lifting from him. He smiled over at Henry. ‘Now then, why don’t you pour me a glass of that excellent wine?’

* * *

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Henry let out a contented groan, one hand resting on a bloated

stomach. ‘I couldn’t eat another thing,’ he murmured sleepily, before adding a quick: ‘And neither could you, Julius.’

Doris had already bustled off to the kitchen, happy in the fact that the family were stuffed fit to bursting. Next step of the mission: fall out to the lounge for coffee and the traditional nap in front of her majesty.’

Olivia took Julius and the girl – the Brigadier could never remember her name. He’d rectify that later. Henry stood, stretching. ‘Are you coming through, Unc?’

The Brigadier looked up, smiling. He wasn’t a bad lad, really.

‘Of course. I’ll be there in a jiffy. Just need to let this lot go down

first.' Henry nodded, and left the room, leaving the Brigadier alone in his thoughts. Through in the kitchen he could hear the clink of

crockery been arranged ready for the great assault on the washing up.

He'd draft Henry in for that later – give Olivia and his wife a chance to put their feet up.

His wonderful, wonderful wife.

He stared over at the extra setting exactly opposite his own seat at the table. The cutlery remained unused and the wine glass shone

brilliantly, unspoiled by any scarlet stain. The napkin was still neatly rolled and the seat itself was cold.

Every year. Always the same.

Swallowing hard, the Brigadier raised his own glass to the heavens.

'Merry Christmas, Doctor. Merry Christmas, wherever you are.'

Dear Great Uncle Peter

Neil Corry

An Adventure of the Fourth Doctor, with Leela

Dear Great Uncle Peter,

Mum says that it's good to write thank-you letters to people who have given you Christmas presents so this is NOT a thank-you letter because people who STEAL things are mean and those who steal Christmas are the meanest. And you're NOT my Great Uncle Peter at all and I don't even HAVE a Great Uncle Peter and you're really aliens from another planet. So there are lots of reasons this is NOT a thank-you letter.

Anyway, I don't have your address and Mum says the Post Office won't deliver to other planets and then tells me not to talk about it any more.

And your spaceship was RUBBISH.

So this is really a STORY so I don't forget what happened with the Doctor and the nice Leela who Dad liked A LOT but Mum did not.

It's hard to think where to start but Dad says I should DIVE IN and we can work around it. He's typing this on his computer with two fingers and a thumb and has promised to put EVERYTHING in, and in BIG

letters where I want them.

I will start with the day BEFORE Christmas. It didn't snow on our street but there was snow on TV. Huge piles of snow, and cars and lorries were stuck. It looked GREAT. You could make loads of snowmen and even a snow fortress like Superman's if you wanted. I was a bit sad that I wasn't one of the people stuck in the cars and lorries. Lucy, who is my sister and is three years older than me and likes skipping and make-up but does not like me, was being nice FOR ONCE and we were

making Mum a big Christmas card. I was being careful with the

Christmas tree and was being careful with Mum. I think she was FED

UP and was being busy in the kitchen. So that day I didn't ask if it was Christmas yet. I think I asked it a lot because Christmas was taking ages to come. And then I missed it because of YOU. But I did get it back, even if I got some memories of Roger Livesy's who lives down the road and has pet frogs and a skinhead. I remember eating a massive Christmas 114

dinner with SPROUTS in it which are bluerk and I wish the aliens had taken them instead. Taking away all the sprouts in the world would have been a good Christmas present.

Then Mum made fried egg and microwave chips and let me have as

much ketchup as I wanted. Lucy said Mum was being FRAZZLED and I

shouldn't bother her. Lucy just likes bossing me because she is eight and a half. She can BOG OFF and her friends Samantha and Astrid can BOG

OFF as well. They didn't have their Christmases stolen.

Then it was bedtime. I had a funny feeling in my tummy. It was all fluttery and jumpy. It took ages and ages to go to sleep. I wanted to wait for Father Christmas but Mum said only bad boys did that and they wouldn't get any presents. I don't know if I'm bad or good because when I broke Lucy's china pony it made her cry and making people cry is a bad thing but I didn't mean it. YOU made me cry

because when I woke up it was Christmas Day BUT IT WASN'T.

I sat on the top stair of the landing and waited and waited for Mum and Lucy to wake up. I can tell the time and it was NEARLY time to open the presents but I would be in BIG TROUBLE with Mum WI went

downstairs too early. I knew what time would be the right time because Dad was coming to our house but would not bring Penny who Mum calls Bad Penny which has made Dad laugh. Dad was going to open presents too. I made him a rock with a motorbike sticker on it. He likes bikes and reads lots of magazines about them and had a big pile of them in Mum's bedroom until she kicked them and Dad moved out but they are friends now and things are okay. I think. I wish Dad had a motorbike, though.

Mum says I would go on a motorbike over her dead body, which makes me a bit sad inside but I do not say anything.

ANYWAY. It is NOT Christmas Day but I think it IS. I am waiting for everyone to wake up and then everyone does, but Lucy just pushes past me and goes downstairs and I think she'll be in BIG TROUBLE and I tell her but she just looks at me and calls me demented. She calls everything demented. And then I hear her go into the kitchen and make breakfast. This isn't right and then it's worse. Mum walks past me AS

WELL and I can't believe it. Then she asks me what I'm doing sitting on the stairs and calls me Cheeky-Chops which is not my name because that is Alex.

I follow Mum downstairs and in the kitchen there's a HUGE pile of washing up which I know was not there when I went to bed because

Mum had been cleaning all day. I remember no one seemed interested that it was Christmas Day and then I went into the front room and EVERYWHERE there were toys and things and a Wii, which I know I

had been specially wishing for and had said to Dad whenever I saw him that I hoped Father Christmas would bring me one, so that would be at 115

least every Tuesday evening and Wednesday morning since a long time.

And then I cried. I don't like crying. Not like Becca Kazinsky in class, who cries EVERY day for something or other, like her tangerine in her

lunch is squashed or her buttons won't do up. I saw that my and Lucy's card to Mum had been opened and was on the mantelpiece. At first Mum was worried I was crying and then I asked her who had opened all the presents and did Lucy give her the nice Christmas card early and where was Dad? Mum said we had opened them together and that that was all yesterday, and she called me Baby which I do not like either. And then I didn't understand ANYTHING and it was horrible and I will never

EVER forget the feeling. It was the worst, much worse than when I slipped on the wall and banged my knees that had cool bruises for days.

The fluttery and jumpy feeling came back but was much bigger and hurt a lot and I cried even more which made Mum cross, so I stopped crying and sat on the sofa and was quiet and was sad. Then Lucy was nice and brought me rice krispies with chocolate milk and asked me 'What's wrong?' and I said, 'When did Christmas happen?' and she looked at me funny and said, 'Yesterday.' I said that wasn't right because yesterday was the day BEFORE Christmas and then she called me demented and

then the doorbell went.

Mum answered the door and it was the Doctor and Leela, although I didn't know their names then. It was also lots of mums and some dads from down our street, which is very long and has all the houses joined up at the sides, and there were as well lots of people the same age as me, like David Winslow, Roger Livesy, Sarah Jenkins who are in my class, and other kids who are not in my class but still live on our street but go to a different school, like Peter Morani, Lyn Tyler and Paul and Paula Thomas who are twins and whose dad is a policeman and is massive. I go up to about his knees! And he has a big voice but it is not as good as the Doctor's who said, 'Good morning, Mrs Parlour,' which is what people say when they are being polite. I call my teacher Mrs

Woodsworth in class but in the playground we call her Mrs Woodworm.

I will try my best to remember what the Doctor said after he said

'Good morning' but Dad says he can help. The Doctor was wearing this big coat and a hat and the biggest scarf I have ever seen, much bigger than my Liverpool scarf which is red and white and Dad says

he will take me to a game ONE DAY when I am bigger. The Doctor's scarf was all sorts of different colours and Leela was wearing jeans Mum said later that 'she must have been greased into' and a big grey jumper that smelt funny. She was always VERY serious but not in the way like teachers are. She had very bright blue eyes and nice dark hair. My favourite thing about the Doctor was his teeth. He had loads of them and he liked showing them off, I think, because he smiled all the time, except when he 116

saw the aliens who made him cross. He was even crosser when they shot him.

He said to Mum, 'I'm the Doctor and this is my friend, Leela,' and pointed to Leela who was holding the hands of Sarah Jenkins and Lyn Tyler, who was sucking her thumb AS ALWAYS, and Leela didn't look pleased about having to hold their hands AT ALL. David, Roger, Paul and Paula and Peter and other kids were crowded around the Doctor. He was a bit magic, I think. He was a bit strange, too, like the world got tingly around him. It felt like he could be your best friend and you knew you would be best friends for ever, even though he didn't even stay for dinner. He and Leela had more aliens to SORT OUT, I think.

What he said then was VERY important. He asked Mum, 'Does Alex

here...' and he pointed to me where I was hiding behind Mum's legs because I am a bit shy with new people, Mum says. 'Does he remember Christmas Day at all?'

And I shook my head ten times and Mum asked what on earth was all this about and it was far too early for this kind of nonsense but when she saw the looks on the other parents' faces, which all looked serious and worried, Mum stopped GOING ON.

'Of course he remembers Christmas,' said Lucy from behind me in her whiney voice. She is a big know-all sometimes.

'I don't,' I said in a quiet voice because I wasn't sure if I was going to be in BIG TROUBLE for not remembering Christmas. I know I wouldn't want to forget – and Dad has told me the word – deliberately, which means on purpose, which means you MEAN it. I had been waiting ages for it.

Then it was Leela who spoke: 'Another child of this strange tribe has had his memories stolen, Doctor.'

'Tribe?' asked Mum, who didn't seem pleased about the word AT

ALL. And then everyone started talking and Paul and Paula started to cry and wanted to know just like me what had happened to Christmas and I joined in and in no time it was DEAD noisy outside our house. It was great when the Doctor raised his arms and shouted over everybody,

'Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls!'

And everyone stopped, although Paul and Paula were still snivelling, which is my favourite word, and Paul had a big bogey on the end of his nose. He does great bogeys.

'This really won't get us anywhere now, will it?' said the Doctor much more quietly. 'Now, Mrs Parlour, these delightful children here,' and he pointed at all of us and gave Paul a yellow spotty handkerchief which he still has and hasn't washed, 'are missing their memories of Christmas Day and, if you'll trust me and my friend here, we hope to try to get them back. Do you trust us, Mrs Parlour?'

And all of us kids shouted, 'Yes! Yes! Yes!' because you could tell that the Doctor was a kid too, even though he was really tall and had a hat. And we were jumping about so much that I even forgot I couldn't remember Christmas. The Doctor made us THAT excited.

The mums and dads told us to stop and when we were quite quiet

Leela showed me and Mum a mobile phone. 'Did your boy receive one of these machines yesterday?'

'His name is Alex, and, yes, yes, he did,' said Mum in her snooty voice, but I NEVER tell her I think that. But she CAN be very snooty with new people. 'I thought it was ridiculous for this Great Uncle Peter, obviously on Richard's side of the family –' that's Dad's side of the family to give a child a phone for a present. And it doesn't even work!'

'Not in the way you imagined,' said the Doctor, 'but it definitely did its job. Mrs Parlour, would you mind if I take a look at it?' And he did his BIG smile. 'I'm rather a marvel with machines.'

And then he stepped in our house and Mum let Leela in too, who had managed to get away from Sarah Jenkins and Lyn Tyler. I wasn't going to let the Doctor out of my sight, which is what Mum says when she thinks I'm going to be in BIG TROUBLE. We all went into the front room with the tree and the presents and the Wii that I must have

played with because it was connected to the TV but I did not remember playing with it. That felt strange.

‘I’m sorry, Doctor, or whatever your name is,’ Mum said, ‘but what has this got to do with my son?’

The Doctor stopped still and I ran into the back of his legs. When he turned round he said, ‘You did hear me about the children’s memories of Christmas being stolen not two minutes ago?’

‘Yes, but –’

‘Mrs Parlour, there are far too many buts in this universe. And Alex here –’ he reached down for me and picked me up as if I was light as a feather, and his big pointy finger was touching the end of my nose ‘– has been deprived of his Christmas and I can’t think of anything more miserable and mean to happen to a five-year-old boy.’

‘Five and a half,’ I said.

‘Sorry, five and a half. Anyway, I intend to find out who did it, why they did it and make sure they don’t do it again.’

And he looked at Mum until she looked away. There was no arguing

with the Doctor who could do the best staring competitions, I bet.

‘But who would or could do such a thing?’ she asked after a minute.

‘Off the top of my head?’ he said, scratching his curly hair. I put his hat on. It was too big and went over my eyes. ‘About 117 different species from 91 different planets in three different galaxies.’

Before Mum could say anything else, Lucy came in with a mobile

phone and asked in her sickly girly voice, ‘Is this what you’re looking for?’

‘Do not trust this child, Doctor,’ said Leela. ‘Her voice cannot disguise that she has the eyes of a Horda.’

‘Of a what?’ shouted Mum.

‘Leela, Leela,’ said the Doctor, putting me down and taking back his hat. ‘You are not helping. Why I decided to show you Christmas, I’ll

never know.'

'Because I found the socks that Madame Nostradamus knitted you for this festival of Christmas.'

'Ah, yes. Those.'

He took the mobile phone from Lucy which wasn't really a mobile

phone but a brain sucker-outer I know NOW. Lucy was frowning at

Leela, who was frowning right back and was much better at it. Then the Doctor went into his coat pocket and brought out something that looked like lots of big, clear Lego bricks all stuck together and had lots of coloured lights flashing inside them. Everyone was waiting for him to say something. It seemed to take forever.

'Hmm,' he said at last.

'Hmm, what?' asked Mum and Leela at the same time.

This is when Dad came in. No one had said he could come round or

anything but Lucy and me were pleased to see him. I think Mum was too.

Who are you?' he asked the Doctor and Leela so I told Dad what had happened.

'That's ridiculous!' Mum and Dad like using that word a lot.

'Yes, it is, isn't it?' said the Doctor and he was smiling. I don't think he was listening very much as he was still watching the flashing-light Lego thing.

'It's true, Dad,' I said and hugged his leg. 'I can't remember

Christmas.'

And then the Doctor said to Leela in a strange half-whispering type voice, 'I can't quite get a fix on the diastellic receiver, although I know it's around here somewhere.' You can tell Dad is helping write this.

'There must be one more of these wretched things in the area we haven't found.' And then he MARCHED out of the front room and onto our

street. Leela followed first, then me, then Lucy, then Dad and then Mum.

Outside our house all the kids and mums and dads were waiting. Then the Doctor asked if there were any other kids in the street about the same age and no one could think of anyone until Peter Morani said about Carl Wilton and that his family always goes away at Christmas to his aunt's in Venezuela. I don't think the Venezuela bit is true because Peter is always GOING ON about Venezuela BUT it is true that Carl's family had gone away this Christmas which Lucy said is demented, but she thinks football 119

is demented so I don't know if going away at Christmas is bad or not.

ANYWAY. The Doctor broke into Carl's house! As soon as he found

out where Carl lived the Doctor ran away, shouting, 'Come on, Lecla!'

But everyone else followed too. It was great! There were loads of us and we all saw the Doctor point a big shiny pen which went 'Brzzzzzz' at Carl's front door then the door opened and he went inside and then the burglar alarm went off and it was SO LOUD. Everyone put their hands on their ears and you couldn't hear anything but the siren and it was dead early and lots of curtains of other houses on our street were being opened and people could see us all outside Carl Wilton's house. And then I saw the Doctor point his pen-thing at a box on the wall and the alarm stopped LIKE THAT and it was the best quietness ever.

It was now that I saw I was still in my pyjamas and slippers and it was still dark and I was cold so Dad put his black leather jacket on me. It was dead heavy but really warm so that was okay. We saw lights go on in Carl's house and then the Doctor and Leela came back out with a

Christmas present. It looked really bad when the Doctor unwrapped it in front of everybody bemuse it was Carl's, I think, but it was a mobile-phone-brain-sucker-outer, and if Carl had opened it he would have forgotten about Christmas Day too.

The Doctor pointed his flashing light Lego thing at it and shouted, 'A-ha!' which was when the police car turned up going 'BWOO-OUP!'

which is what police cars do if they don't want to do the full WEE-OOUW! WOO! WOO!' siren but want to let people know that the police are watching you RIGHT NOW just in case you're being a criminal.

The Doctor looked worried and said REALLY quickly, ‘Everyone! I

think I know where I can find the people who stole your children’s memories but it would be a good idea if the lovely policemen in that car didn’t get involved. You all know something very strange has happened and I’m sure you’re all very bemused and probably very worried about it.

But I promise you, if those gentlemen get involved, your children will never, ever remember Christmas Day. You do want me to put that right, don’t you, hmmm?’

And EVERYONE believed him. Afterwards Mum said he could have

been the one to blame for Christmas being stolen in the first place but right then EVERYONE believed in the Doctor. He was magic, as magic as Christmas.

Then he did another big smile, told Leela to ‘get a move on’ and they went back inside Carl’s house.

Everyone seemed to know just what to do when the policemen stepped out of the car. The parents began shouting, some of us kids were crying, and Paul AND Paula had big bogeys on the ends of their noses because they were crying the most. It was almost as noisy as Carl’s house alarm 120

going off.

Then Dad scooped me up became I was wearing his big jacket and

said, ‘Do you want to see where the Doctor and the nice lady went?’ And I nodded my head ten times so, with everything that was going on, we sneaked into Carl’s house and no one saw us! Not even Mum who

always keeps a CLOSE EYE on me. The fluttery and jumpy feeling was back but this time it felt GREAT, although afterwards Dad got into BIG

TROUBLE with Mum for sneaking off.

At the back of Carl’s house is a big field and there is a proper road to it but Dad and I walked through the house just like Leela and the Doctor. It was weird. I’d never been in Carl’s house before and don’t really know him. Dad had to climb a fence at the end of their garden at the back of the house and lift me over it which was great because I

like being tall like Dad. We could see the Doctor and Leela running towards a small hill in the middle of the field. I didn't remember a hill being there before, but thought it might be like not remembering Christmas Day. This was

WRONG.

The Doctor and Leela were at the hill that was a bit taller than the Doctor and about the same wide, so Dad says. We heard the Doctor say,

'All right, you can show yourselves now!' which is a very strange thing to say to a hill. When the hill didn't answer him back, the Doctor fetched his big pen and made the 'Brzzzzz' noise at the hill and then the hill vanished and there was a SPACESHIP instead of a hill.

But it was a RUBBISH spaceship, not like the ones on telly that go WHOOSH and are massive and have loads of people in them. It was all rusty and just didn't look nice and was very, very small and wouldn't fit even me.

'Ah,' said the Doctor when he saw Dad and me behind him. No one

said anything and Dad just had his mouth open and I thought his chin was going to fall off but it didn't.

'Dad!' I said, because all of a sudden I couldn't see because his jacket had gone over my face. Dad put me down and the jacket fell off me.

Being a bit cold didn't seem important any more. Then Dad put me

behind his legs but I said, 'That's not fair! You can see!' So I grabbed his leg and wouldn't budge and then there was this big 'POP! FZZZZT!

WHSSSSH! WHSSSHTTP noise and suddenly everyone could see the

ALIENS. They were rubbish, too, and there were only two of them. If I was an alien I'd be a big horrible monster, and definitely would not be a grey squidgy big centipede thing with no clothes on but wearing only pink see-through sunglasses they might think looked cool but were even more rubbish than they were.

But they were aliens and I saw them!

They made this horrible noise when they spoke, like this: 'Squeeeee!

Squeeee! Squee! Squee! Squeeeeeeeeee!' but really fist and the Doctor and Leela could understand them.

'Yes, I'm sorry about your chameleon circuit,' said the Doctor after one of them had squeed A LOT. 'I have terrible trouble with my own, but I just wanted to wish you a happy new year.'

There was more squeeing. It really GOT ON MY NERVES.

'I was wondering when you would get round to asking what we were

doing. You see, neither my little friend here –' and he pointed to me nor any of his young associates can remember yesterday at all, and it really was rather a special day.'

There was more squeeing and I think one of them was laughing too.

'You think stealing children's memories is funny?' said the Doctor. He was CROSS.

'We should gut these heartless worms where they stand, Doctor,' said Leela who had suddenly found a knife in her boot.

'Put the knife away, Leela. Alex will get scared.'

I only got scared when one of the aliens pulled out an orange-and-blue space gun that was as big as it was and then FZ-ZT! It shot the Doctor and he fell down, and the spaceship went 'SSSILIT! SSSSH! TZZZZZ!

POP!' and the aliens disappeared and their spaceship started to rumble.

But the Doctor WASN'T dead! Hooray! After not even a minute he sat up rubbing his head and said, 'Nerve dislocater beam? How rude!' And then he looked right at me with his big eyes and said, 'It's time to show them we mean business, Alex. Christmas is not to be meddled with.' And I nodded my head ten times.

'Doctor,' said Leela, 'I think these cowardly creatures are trying to leave in their metal box.'

The Doctor didn't answer. He stood up, did things to his big pen which OBVIOUSLY was not a pen and pointed it at the spaceship.

'Cover your ears!' he ordered, and then there was this really screechy noise, much worse than the squeeing aliens. Today was turning into a VERY loud day.

It seemed like a long time before anything happened because it was hard to keep your eyes open and listen at the same time because of the horrible pen noise. Then it stopped and everyone started breathing again.

Then there was a tinkle, then a crash, then a plink, and then a thud. Then the rubbish little spaceship fell in on itself! The Doctor smiled at me, then frowned: ‘Ala. I do hope I’ve not damaged the diastellic crystal.’

Then there was the ‘POP! FZZZZT! WHSSSSH! WHSSSIIITT noise

but much quieter this time and the aliens squirmed their way out of the mess of their spaceship.

‘Squeeee! Squee! Squee?’ said one of them who had lost his

sunglasses.

‘No, I won’t come in with you on your plans to sell these children’s memories. What kind of Time Lord do you think I am?’

‘Squee?! Squee! Squee!’ said the other one.

‘No, not even with a fifty per cent cut.’

All this time the squeeing aliens were wriggling out of what was left of their spaceship, which now just looked like a big pile of junk. Suddenly they were free and with a loud ‘Squee!’ they ran off?

‘Leela! After them!’ shouted the Doctor but she was already chasing the aliens across the park at the back of our street. ‘You too, Mr Parlour.

You’ll be helping to capture two intergalactic criminals wanted in seven systems.’

Dad looked at the Doctor then back at me, then raced off after Leela.

The aliens were tiny but went dead fast over the field. I don’t think Dad likes running.

Then me and the Doctor went over to what was left of the alien’s

rubbish spaceship and the Doctor started picking bits up and throwing

them away, muttering something to himself about terrible workmanship.

And then he went A-ha!' and in his hand he had this glittery orange and see-through stone. He looked at me and showed off all his huge teeth again. I was jealous. I've still got all of my baby teeth.

'Is that the dia... thing crystal?'

'Yes, Alex, I do believe it is,' The Doctor nodded and pointed his magic pen at the orange sparkly stone and then...

POP!

I was waiting with Lucy at the top of the stairs and she was more excited than I was that it was Christmas. And then Mum appeared and she was sleepy and smiley and she carried me downstairs giving me lots of kisses which was all right FOR ONCE and we went into the front room which was like more magic than I ever thought I'd ever see. There was boxes and boxes and boxes and it was so exciting and the tree was even bigger than I remember and there was so much excitement and then the doorbell went and I jumped up in surprise, then remembered that Dad was coming for Christmas Day too and Mum was being pleased to see him and everyone was being dead nice to each other...

I fell on my bum on the cold ground. Everything had come back in a BIG rush and I didn't know where I was for a second, but the hard field helped me remember about the aliens and the Doctor and Leela and Dad.

The Doctor looked at me very SERIOUSLY and asked me if I could

remember Christmas Day and I really, really could so nodded my head ten times. Then Leela and Dad came back and each had one of the

squeeing aliens in an outstretched hand, only the aliens weren't squeeing, they were hissing because Leela and Dad held them very tightly so they did not escape. Dad did not look pleased holding the slimy creature but 123

Leela looked like she had won the World Cup.

'I have captured the treacherous worms. They could not outrun a

warrior of the Sevateem. And Mr Parlour was valiant in his attempts

to keep up with me.'

And she smiled at Dad, who was puffing and panting and pulling a

funny face at his alien.

'Good work,' said the Doctor, who pulled out two plastic bags from his pockets and put them over the aliens. I was shocked! Mum says you can't play with plastic bags because they're DANGEROUS and you can hurt yourself – and this made me think of Mum and she would be cross that we had gone after the Doctor and Leela.

But I didn't want anything bad to happen to the aliens even though they had been HORRIBLE. The Doctor looked right at me and, with the aliens fighting in the plastic bags, squeeing their heads off AS USUAL, he knelt down and squeezed my nose and smiled.

It's all right,' he said. 'They'll be perfectly safe in the bags. They don't breathe like we do.' Which made me think very hard, but I asked the Doctor to promise anyway and he said he SOLEMNLY swore that the

aliens would come to no harm and so I believed him.

And then the Doctor said they had to go now. He gave me a little wave and a big smile and he and Leela walked away. I wanted to follow them but Dad held me back and said quietly that we should let them go.

Even though you did the meanest thing I can think of, Great Uncle Peter, all my friends I told agreed that alien monsters from other planets should have nice Christmases too. After all, everyone got their memories back and no one was hurt, even if I do remember eating more sprouts than I'd like.

It wasn't right what you did but you gave me the best Christmas

present ever: an adventure with the Doctor!

Do You Believe in the

Krampus?

Xanna Eve Chown

An Adventure of the Fifth Doctor, with Turlough

The snow that had fallen in the morning had already turned to slush.

Walking home from school down Imbergstrasse, Lukas let his duffel bag swing lower and lower until it was trailing along the wet

pavement. His dad would kill him when he got home, he thought, but then what difference did one muddy bag make? It was already

December and far too late to start being good now. Lukas had not been a good boy all year. In Fact, there were times when he had been quite naughty. Lukas knew it and his dad knew it. And if his dad knew it then Saint Nicholas knew it. And if *Saint Nicholas* knew – Lukas's stomach lurched suddenly – then his name would be on the list. Not the list of good children, tucked up in bed waiting for their shoes to be filled with presents. The other one. The list with the names of children deserving a visit from the Krampus. And that list was written in blood.

Max sat back on his leather sofa, feeling very pleased with himself.

Katharina had smiled at him at lunchtime. He poured himself a small glass of red wine and reached for the paper packet of gingerbread he had bought at the Christmas market in Residenzplaft. He had smiled back at her, of course. Then she had tipped her head to one side, shrugged her shoulders and gone back to polishing the glasses behind the bar. It was definitely a start. Tomorrow, he would go back to the hotel and smile at her again. If she smiled back, he would offer to buy her a drink. Just an orange juice, probably, seeing as how she was working. But, still...

He glanced at his watch. Lukas should be back from school by now.

Max hummed under his breath as he sauntered into the kitchen to put the dinner on.

The chicken kievs took about twenty minutes in the oven from

frozen, and he could do some of those potato shapes that Lukas liked.

Maybe there were some peas in the freezer too. The top drawer of the freezer was stiff and chunks of ice fell onto the floor as he pulled it out.

As he reached for the peas, he thought of Katharina's round, smiling face. Her dad would have taken over at the bar by now. She would be

upstairs, turning down the beds in the guestrooms. Plumping the

pillows. Patting down the sheets. Max put the frozen peas down on the counter. He'd love an excuse to check into one of the guestrooms for a night, just so he could fall asleep knowing he was sleeping in a bed made by Katharina.

Was Katharina's room on the same floor? Would he dare tiptoe

down the hall towards her room and knock quietly on the door?

Maybe...

There was a crash as the front door banged open. Max jumped and

the advent wreath over his head swung dangerously from side to side.

' *S'gott, papa*,' called Lukas. 'What's for dinner?'

Lukas dumped his bag on the floor near the front door, nudging it under the coat rack so that his dad wouldn't notice the muddy leaves stuck to the bottom. He went into the sitting room and turned on the TV.

'Dinner in about twenty minutes,' said his dad, following him in.

'Mm.'

'I'm sorry?'

'Thanks, Dad.'

'It's chicken.'

'Aw, dad. We had that for lunch.' It was out of Lukas's mouth before he could stop himself. His dad's smile disappeared.

'I've put them in the oven now, Lu,' he said. 'So we've got to have them. I'm doing peas too.'

Lukas frowned slightly. He could lie and say that he didn't mind

having the same meal twice. But he couldn't quite bring himself to say the words. He kept his eyes trained on the TV set.

'I hate peas.'

‘You didn’t hate them when we had them last night.’

‘I did!’ Lukas couldn’t bear other people telling him what he felt. ‘I’ve always hated them.’

‘Now you’re just being ridiculous.’

‘I hate them when you do them.’ Lukas’s voice rose to a higher pitch.

‘You don’t cook them enough, so they’re all hard. I like them mushy, like when Mum does them.’ There was a pause. Lukas had gone too far.

Again. His father opened his mouth then shut it again and pressed his lips together tightly.

‘Well, it’s a shame she’s not here, then, isn’t it?’ he said shortly and left the room.

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Lukas kept his eyes on the TV but he wasn’t looking at the

programme. He was thinking about his mother. Two years ago, when he was eight, she would come to pick him up from the playground at the end of every day. She always asked the same question. ‘What happened at school today?’ Then he would tell her the bits he could remember as they walked home. His dad never asked. What would he have told her about today? He didn’t have to think for long. There was only one thing he had been thinking about. Vanessa Heine was scared of the Krampus too.

Vanessa was in his class for Art. They were making posters, like they did every year – big, bright collages to go on boards outside the school, which was where the *Krampuslauf* started. Vanessa had come to sit with him, even though he was doing one of the most boring bits, rolling bits of white tissue paper into balls for Saint Nicholas’s beard. She had had a fight with her best friend Marta. Marta was working on the Krampus.

She was using crayons to draw curly black fur all down the legs and sticking crackly red sweet wrappers all around the eyes so that they looked as if they were on fire. Marta wasn’t scared of the Krampus because she knew that she had been good all year. She was cross because Vanessa wouldn’t help her.

‘I don’t like doing the Krampus,’ said Vanessa. ‘All that *red* looks like blood.’

‘It’s supposed to,’ said Marta. ‘You’re just scared cos you think he’s going to *get* you this year.’

‘He will *not*.’

‘Will too. You told Hannah in the canteen that you don’t even *like* Saint Nicholas’s Day.’ The classroom went quiet. ‘You said you weren’t going to go and watch the *Krampuslauf*, even though your brother’s in it this year. Everyone knows that’s the quickest way to get on the

Krampus’s list.’

‘I don’t believe in the Krampus,’ shouted Vanessa.

Vanessa pushed Marta, and Marta threw the sweet wrappers in

Vanessa’s hair. Then Vanessa began to cry, but Lukas knew that she wasn’t crying because of the sweet wrappers. She was crying because of the Krampus. She did believe in him really, but now she had said she didn’t and everyone knows that you can’t take it back once you’ve said it out loud.

Saint Nicholas carries a sack that’s full of toys and sweets but the Krampus has an empty basket on his back. He stuffs the wickedest

children inside so tightly that they can’t get out. Lukas had been able to picture the scene vividly for as long as he could remember.

When Lukas was four, his dad had received a letter in the post. When he read it he was very excited and shouted loudly, punching the air with 127

his fist. Then he shut himself up in his study, with his paints and brushes and didn’t come out for days. Lukas’s mother made sandwiches and cups of coffee and left them outside the door. Sometimes she made *lebkuchen* and jugs of beer. When she did that, she would knock gently and take them into the room, shutting the door quietly behind her. Lukas could hear her laughing from the other side of the door. His mother would come out with a smile on her face.

‘Hi, Lu,’ she said. ‘Would you like a drink too?’ Lukas followed her into the kitchen and watched her pour him some juice into his blue plastic cup.

‘Can I see Daddy?’ he asked.

‘Not at the moment,’ said his mother. ‘He’s working hard.’

‘What’s he doing?’

‘He’s got a commission,’ said his mother proudly.

‘What’s that?’

‘He’s been asked to do some paintings for one of the big card

companies in Berlin.’ Lukas remembered how happy his mother had

looked. A couple of days later, his father had opened the office door and called his name.

‘Lu? Are you there? Do you want to come and see what I’ve been

painting?’ Lukas toddled over to the study door and followed his father into the room. His dad put his hands under his son’s armpits and heaved him up into the air, sitting him down on the big swivelling chair by the desk.

‘What is it?’ asked Lukas. ‘Is it your mission?’

‘My mission?’ asked his dad, startled. Then he laughed. ‘My

commission, you mean? Yes, it’s my commission.’ He carefully pulled away the sheet of tracing paper that was lying over the top of the artwork to keep it clean.

‘Look, Lu. Can you see who that is?’ he asked, pointing at the figure of a little boy in blue pyjamas. His blond hair was tousled as he peeked around the side of a door. Lukas glanced at the boy, then down at his pyjamas.

‘S’me!’ he said, but his eyes were glued to the rest of the scene. In the middle of the painting, the Krampus was standing by the fireplace. Its red eyes were lit up by the flames of the fire and its long, forked red tongue was lolling out of its mouth. Thick, black chains hung from its hairy wrists and its hooves trampled mud and dirt into the floor. In one hand, it held a basket with the arm of a child sticking out. With the other, it was lifting up the corner of the patterned rug to see if anyone was hiding underneath it. The Krampus had been pictured in the middle of a hunt.

He was hunting a little boy. He was hunting Lukas.

* * *

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After Lukas was in bed, Max decided to go back to the hotel bar on Giselakai for a drink. It was only at the end of the street and Lukas had his mobile number in case of emergencies. It was nearly Christmas, for God's sake, he wanted to go out and have some kind of festive cheer.

The railings on the other side of the Salzach river were covered in sparkling lights. Maybe Katharina would be behind the bar... But when he reached the hotel, Katharina's father was serving.

'Evening, Max,' he said amiably. 'What can I get you?' Max ordered a beer, then scanned the people in the room. Katharina was sitting at a table in the corner, with two men.

'Looks like your lovely daughter's got her hands full over there,' he said, when the beer came. He gave a fake-sounding sort of laugh.

'They're not from round here, I'd say?'

'They're staying upstairs,' said the landlord. 'Checked in today. One of them's a doctor. Didn't say which university he was from, though.

They've come to watch the *Krampuslauf* tomorrow.'

This was fate, Max thought. It was a good idea to sit and talk to Katharina in company first. It would make the offer of buying her a drink sound much better, when it eventually came. Less pushy,

perhaps. Max picked up the beer and sauntered over to the table.

'Hello,' he said. 'Mind if I join you?' Katharina looked up from her drink and smiled.

'Course not,' she said. 'Max, this is the Doctor and this is Turlough.

They're staying upstairs.'

'So I hear,' said Max, pulling up a stool.

'Really?' said Turlough. 'Not much news round here tonight, then.'

Max frowned and turned his attention to the blond man. He was

wearing a pale suit and had a stick of celery stuck in the lapel of his jacket.

'So you're in Salzburg to see the *Krampuslauf*?' Max asked. 'Quite a big thing around here. All the local kids get involved. My son's been making posters at school.'

'The running of the Krampus,' said the Doctor. 'That's right. Yes, we've just got something to – er – sort out Then we'll be on our way again.'

'Max is an artist,' said Katharina. 'He used to draw Krampus cards.'

'Really?' said the Doctor, studying Max's face. 'You like scaring all the little children?'

'Well, it's all harmless fun,' said Max, taking a sip from his drink.

'The children love being scared, isn't that right, Katharina?' Katharina smiled.

'Well, it's just a bit of a tradition,' she said. But Turlough here was explaining that they don't have anything like a Krampus where he's 129

from.'

'In England,' said the Doctor hurriedly.

'No,' said Turlough, in a tone that seemed to suggest he hadn't cared much for even the traditions he had been exposed to. 'Nothing like that at all. They don't really go in for Saint Nicholas's Day. Just presents for the good little boys and girls on Christmas morning.'

'And if the little boys and girls are naughty?' asked Max, in what he hoped was a worldly sort of way.

'Well, nothing really,' said Turlough. 'I thought that the message was more of a be-good-or-Santa-won't-come kind of thing. To be

honest, I didn't pay too much attention.'

'I hadn't really thought about it,' said Katharina excitedly. She looked at the Doctor in an admiring way that made Max feel

uncomfortable. 'But it's quite fascinating. There are all these different

traditions...'

'Yes, in England, Christmas celebrations are centred around the end of December,' said the Doctor. 'But here in Austria, festivities are well on the way by St Nicholas's Day. On 6 December, God grants the

legendary bishop a return visit to Earth. He always brings a servant.

The Dutch have Zwarte Piet and in the Czech Republic there's an evil spirit called Cert. In Germany, there's Knecht Ruprecht and in Austria, the dreaded Krampus.'

He sounds like a book, thought Max, annoyed. A boring book. But

he could see Katharina drinking in every word.

'Yes,' Max said loudly. 'Yes, everyone knows all about that.'

'I didn't,' said Turlough. 'But I must say I'm looking forward to your celebrations. Katharina's been telling us all about them. What is it, again? Young men dressed in furs and wearing wooden masks with goat's horns on, running through the streets rattling chains, clanking cowbells and terrorising passers-by. Can't think why it hasn't caught on in more places.'

'It is fun,' said Katharina, who didn't seem to have caught his tone.

'Saint Nicholas walks behind them, handing out presents to the kids.

Well, it's someone dressed up as Saint Nicholas. Actually, it's usually Dad.'

'Can't wait,' said Turlough. Max felt like punching him. This

conversation hadn't gone the way he was hoping at all. He looked at his watch and sighed.

'Time to go,' he said. 'I just came for a quick one. I mean, a quick beer, sorry. You know...'

' *Tschuss*, Max,' said Katharina. 'See you soon.' But she was looking at the Doctor.

When Max got home, he felt depressed. He didn't think Katharina

had seen his best side during the conversation. In fact, she was

probably sitting with those two men now, laughing at him behind his back. The blond one was definitely after her. The one with the red hair and the sneering expression he wasn't so sure about. But the blond one with his posh way of talking and his university degree...

He went up to his room and looked out of the window. The lights

were still on in the hotel. As he stared out into the night, he saw the blond man letting himself out of a side door. He glanced around over his shoulder as if he was afraid of being watched, then started along the cobbled street at a brisk trot. Up to no good, thought Max grimly. He paused for just a second, then went back downstairs, opened the front door, and set off after him.

Lukas was awake when he heard his father come home. He had been

having nightmares again. His dreams, when he remembered them, were filled with glowing eyes and loud screams. Sometimes, his mother was being stuffed into a basket; sometimes he was. Then he would be

falling and falling through the darkness, catching glimpses of the pale, white bones of other children, until he woke up with a jump. He hadn't told his dad about the dreams.

Lukas clicked on the light, and the familiar objects in his room

calmed him down. He heard his dad moving about, then he heard the front door open again. Curiously, he turned off the light and went over to the window. It had started to snow again. As Lukas watched his father hurrying down the street in the direction of the town hall a nasty thought struck him. He was going to meet someone. He was going to meet the Krampus...

Quick as a flash, Lukas pulled on his boots and his big, winter coat.

He grabbed his door keys, stuffed them into his pocket with his school gloves, and ran down the stairs after his father. All the time, he was thinking about what he was going to do. If there was a plan for the Krampus to carry him off, he wanted to know about it. Lukas forced himself to walk faster. He could just make out his father up ahead, lit up by the streetlights, turning right, down Steingasse in the direction of the old barn.

Was there someone in front of him? Lukas wasn't sure. His father

turned round, looking around him and Lukas crouched down by a car, out of sight. When he stood up again, his father was gone. But there was a dim light in the barn up ahead. Lukas crept out from behind the car. The barn door was open a chink and Lukas flattened himself

against the wall and listened.

'Three or four, that's-s-s not too much, is it?' came a voice from inside the barn. It was a silky voice with a slight hiss that Lukas didn't 131

recognise at all.

' *One* would be too many, can't you see that?' It was a man's voice.

He sounded exasperated.

'Nons-s-sense, at this time of the year? Don't try to fool me, I've done my research.'

'Well, you've got it wrong this time and I'm sorry. But I'm going to have to ask you to leave. If you need a lift anywhere or some help getting off this planet, then all you have to do is ask. But I will not permit you to harm any children.'

'But my dear Doctor, they are ex-s-s-peering it. I've been watching them make their preparations-s-s. All I have to do is a little more reconnaiss-s-s-sance to make sure that I take the most s-s-spirited children, and everyone will know exactly what has-s-s happened to them.'

'They won't have a clue. Nobody really believes in the Krampus.

It's just a fairy story used to scare the children. Look, if you insist on doing this, I'll find a way to stop the Krampuslauf.'

Lukas peered through the crack in the door and moaned in fear. The man inside the barn turned round, pulling an ugly Mr hood up over his head. But it was too late. Lukas caught sight of two stumpy red horns and glowing eyes set in a hairy, black face. There was no question in Lukas's mind as to what was going on. The Krampus was hiding out in this barn, spying on the town and deciding which children to take away. And his father obviously knew. He was around here somewhere, waiting to tell the creature all his son's bad deeds from the past year.

Lukas moved away from the door.

‘Hello,’ said a voice behind him. It was a thin man with ginger hair.

‘What are you doing out here?’

Lukas kicked him in the shins as hard as he could and tried to run for it, but the man grabbed hold of his coat.

‘Hang on,’ he said.

Lukas screamed as loud as he could.

Max had been listening in at the window on the opposite side of the barn. He came storming through the snow, just in time to see the red-haired man from the pub grabbing his son’s coat.

‘Doctor, you’ve had a visitor,’ Turlough was saying, rubbing his

shin. Max looked past him into the barn where the Doctor and a tall, dark man in a long fur robe were standing. His hood was pulled so far over his head that Max couldn’t see any of his features clearly.

‘What the hell are you doing with my son?’ demanded Max.

Turlough turned round wearily.

‘And another one,’ he said. ‘Shouldn’t you people be in bed? You’ve

got a big day tomorrow. Who goes racing around in the dark, the night *before* the party?’

‘Some kind of lunatic,’ said Max fiercely, staring pointedly at the Doctor.

‘I’ll say!’ said Turlough.

‘Maybe a *dangerous* lunatic with a plan to mess up the Christmas celebrations for the children,’ said Max. He pushed his way into the barn and glared around him.

‘Oh, hello,’ said the Doctor. ‘Max, wasn’t it? Is this your son? Nice to meet you.’

Turlough let go of Lukas’s aim and he moved to his father’s side, staring at the man in the fur robe. Max’s initial surprise at seeing his

son had turned into a sharp fear for his safety when he saw Turlough grab him. Now that Lukas was safe, Max's anxiety was turning into parental rage.

'And what the hell are you doing here?' he asked. 'You are not

allowed to leave the house on your own late at night. Anything could have happened.'

Lukas sniffed and rubbed his nose.

'I was just following you,' he said. 'I'm too young to be left at home on my own.' The boy's defiant face made his father quiver with rage.

'I'm taking you home right now,' he said.

'Ah, yes,' said the man in furs, stepping forward. With a small

shock, Max realised that the man was at least eight feet tall. 'Jus-s-st a second. Before you go, perhaps-s-s you can settle a little dis-s-s-pute that we have been having.' He looked at the Doctor. 'Will he do?'

The Doctor nodded.

'The Krampus-s-s,' said the man, staring hard at Max. 'Is he real?'

Max stared hard at his son.

'Oh, yes,' Max said grimly. The Doctor raised his eyebrows and

started to shake his head.

'Not now –' he began, but Max was too angry to care.

'Yes,' said Max, putting a hand on his son's shoulder. 'He's real all right. And I know exactly which house he will be visiting this year...'

Lukas twisted around and broke away from his grip. He ran to the

barn door and out into the night. The barn door slammed behind him with a crash. The Doctor put a hand up to his head as if he was getting a headache.

'Max,' he said slowly. 'Have you got any idea what you've just

done?'

Max didn't like the patronising tone he detected. The tall man slid away into the depths of the barn, laughing to himself.

'Listen, you freak,' said Max. He yanked open the barn door and

stepped out into the snow. 'What are you trying to do? Asking stupid questions, creeping around at night... Trying to impress women who are already taken and *not interested anyway*.'

'I'm sorry?' said the Doctor with a start, as if the conversation had taken an unexpected turn.

'You and Katharina,' exploded Max, turning furiously back to face him. 'I was there, watching you.'

The Doctor followed Max to the door.

'I'm sorry, you'll have to remind me. Who is –'

'Katharina!' Max broke off suddenly as the woman in question came dashing towards the barn. She was wearing a pale blue nightie with a big woollen jumper pulled over the top of it, and her snow boots. Her hair bounced off her shoulders in two long plaits as she ran. 'That's Katharina.'

'Have you seen Vanessa?' she shouted. 'She's gone! My little sister has vanished.'

The Doctor spun on his heel and glared down the length of the barn but the hissing voice came from the darkness.

'Oh, don't be s-s-silly. I haven't done anything yet. It's not the right day and I'm a s-s-stickler for protocol.'

Katharina stopped a little way from the barn, breathing heavily from the running. Max rushed over and took her arm.

'She's not in the barn,' he said. 'It's just that Doctor and his weird friends. Come on, I'll take you back to the hotel. We can organise a proper search party from there.' This was exactly the sort of

opportunity he had been looking for fora long time. He was sure that Vanessa was nearby, or staying at a friend's house. He would find her, comfort Katharina and generally be a hero. He started to lead Katharina away from the barn. To his annoyance, the Doctor followed

them,

leaving Turlough behind.

‘Wait, Max,’ said the Doctor, catching them up. ‘You have put

children’s lives at risk. I want you to come back and tell the truth.

Come with me and tell my friend that the Krampus doesn’t exist.’

‘Look, *kamerad*,’ said Max, walking faster. ‘I’m going to search for Katharina’s little sister. I think you’ve got your priorities all wrong.’

‘My priorities?’ spluttered the Doctor.

‘I know why you’re here,’ growled Max over his shoulder.

‘You do? Well, why aren’t you helping me? The creature’s not really all that bad, he’s just misunderstood the situation. He believes, he really believes that if he eats a few of your children disguised as the Krampus, then no one will mind. You have to help me convince him

he’s wrong!’

‘What the hell are you talking about?’ asked Max, as Katharina

clutched tightly onto his arm, her eyes widening in the dark.

‘You said you knew why I was here,’ said the Doctor, exasperated

beyond belief.

‘I do,’ said Max. They had reached Giselakai and the hotel was in sight. ‘I heard you talking in the barn. You’ve come here to ruin the Christmas celebrations. You’ve come here to mess up the

Krampuslauf. And,’ he added darkly, ‘I think you’ve come here to seduce a certain woman.’

Katharina gave a little excited gasp and clutched onto Max’s arm

even tighter. The Doctor stared from one to the other with a strange look on his face. They turned into the street where the hotel was in time to hear a shout from one of the houses.

‘Marta’s missing!’ A woman ran out into the road. ‘Has anyone seen my Marta?’ Another door opened.

‘Alexander’s disappeared too,’ said a man. Katharina detached

herself from Max’s arm and ran over to join them.

‘Vanessa’s gone too,’ she said breathlessly. ‘Max is organising a search party.’

Lukas sat down on the low wall at the edge of the car park behind Sebastianskirche, surrounded by a small group of children. Their ages ranged from six to 15. Most were in their pyjamas with boots and coats and scarves pulled on over the top.

‘Lukas, if you’re making this up, I’ll never forgive you,’ said

Vanessa, stamping her feet on the snow. She was wearing pink furry snow boots.

‘Me neither,’ said Marta, who was holding Vanessa’s arm. They

seemed to have made up since their art room dispute. But now that Lukas had told as many children as he could find, and they were all gathered together out here, he wasn’t sure what to do. He hopped from one foot to the other.

‘I just wanted to warn you,’ he said, desperately. ‘It’s not like… I mean, I don’t have a plan. I just think… Maybe we should all go away somewhere for a bit. Just until Saint Nicholas’s Day is over?’

One of the older boys, Alexander, grinned at him. He was several

years above Lukas at school and often in detention.

‘Well, I’m going to have a look,’ he said. He was enjoying the drama of the whole thing immensely. ‘I can’t wait to see what’s in that barn that scared you so much, Lukas. A pig, maybe? Some goats with long, scary horns?’ He laughed and some of the other children joined in. He put his hands up to his head and pointed his fingers to make horns.

‘Oooooh, I’m the Krampus,’ he said. Lukas dodged out of his way.

‘It’s true,’ he said. ‘The Krampus is in the barn. I saw him.’

‘What does he look like?’ asked Marta breathlessly.

‘He’s really, really tall and thin. He’s got a big, fur cloak on, so you can’t see hardly any of him at all, but I saw his face before he put his hood up. He’s got horns,’ said Lukas. ‘Red horns, and his eyes are kind of the wrong shape.’

‘Come on,’ urged Alexander. His eyes were gleaming in a way that

made Lucas feel slightly afraid. Alexander bent down and picked up a brick from the ground. ‘I reckon it’s some old tramp.’ His friend Florian laughed approvingly. He held out a long, black chain and a stick to show him. ‘We can scare him a bit,’ he said. ‘Good practice for the *Krampuslauf* tomorrow.’

The group set off in the direction of the barn, some of the younger ones trailing a bit behind.

‘Hey, Vanessa,’ said Florian. ‘If it is the Krampus, we’ll be heroes.’

‘Heroes?’ echoed Marta.

‘If we kill the Krampus,’ said Florian seriously. ‘No one will ever have to worry about being naughty again.’

The word ‘kill’ hung in the air and a thrill of excitement rippled through a few of the group. Florian grinned, and pulled a cigarette from his pocket.

‘Hey,’ said Marta, uneasily. ‘No one said anything ’bout killing.’

‘Got a light, anybody?’ Florian asked, waving the crumpled cigarette about. Lukas could tell he was only asking to make sure everyone

knew that he was smoking. Alexander handed him a box of matches.

‘Give us one,’ he said. But Florian shook his head.

‘Only managed to nick one from Mum’s room,’ he said. ‘We can go

halves on it.’

The children reached the barn. The door was closed, but the children could hear voices from inside. Alexander reached out to open it and Marta gave a little scream. Alexander took his hand away.

‘Scared?’ said Florian scornfully. He elbowed his friend out of the way

and shoved the wooden door as hard as he could. It opened with a crash and the children bundled into the dark barn. Stacks of dry hay were piled up on both sides of the door.

'Hello?' shouted Florian. ' *Herr* Krampus? Or is it *Trampus*!' He laughed at his own joke. His laughter echoed in the dark. Then there was another noise, this time a quiet hiss. Something was moving in the far corner of the barn.

Marta screamed shrilly and Alexander threw the brick he was

holding into the dark, as hard as he could. There was a dull thud, then a suit of grunting noise.

'You hit something!' shouted Marta. 'You're crazy, Alexander

Ducek. I'm going to get my mum!' She started to run, pulling Vanessa
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out of the barn with her.

Florian and Alexander exchanged glances.

'Hey,' said Lukas. 'I told you there was something...'

'Shut it,' said Alexander. He was shaking. 'Give me some of that

cigarette, Florian.'

'No,' said his friend. He was staring into the dark as hard as he could. Lukas thought he was trying to gather up the courage to go and see what had been hlt.

'You said we could go halves,' whined Alexander.

Florian angrily thrust the cigarette at his friend, purposefully letting the burning end brush against his fingertips.

'Hey!' Alexander let the cigarette drop to the floor and shook his hand. He swore loudly. 'What did you do that for?'

'Shut up,' said Florian. 'I'm listening.' Lukas was listening too. The grunting noise had stopped. He plucked at Florian's arm.

'I think it's dead, I think Alex killed it,' he said.

' *You* shut up and all,' said Florian furiously. Then he looked at the

floor. ‘Christ, Alex. You’ve set light to the bloody barn.’ The dropped cigarette had fallen into the nearest bale of hay, which was quietly smouldering.

‘I think we should get someone,’ said Lukas. ‘My dad…’ But he

stopped when he saw Florian’s expression.

‘We’ll smoke him out,’ said Florian, triumphantly. ‘Whatever’s

there won’t stay hiding for long once this lot catches.’ He kicked at the hay, causing more strands to catch light. Lukas backed towards the door.

By the time Max reached the barn, the whole of the thatched roof was alight. Nicola came rushing up behind him, clutching Vanessa’s hand, followed by her father and the Doctor. Max looked at the group of children who were standing to one side, watching it burn. He could make out the shape of his son, standing with his mouth open following the red sparks as they reached up into the sky.

The Doctor ran over to the group of children, with Max following

close behind.

‘Get back,’ the Doctor shouted urgently. ‘All of you get back.’ His voice seemed to break some kind of spell and the children started moving away from the burning barn. More people from the town were running down the road towards them.

‘What happened?’ Max asked, grabbing the nearest girl by the

shoulder. ‘Is anybody hurt? Is anybody in there?’ The girl shook her head.

‘Just the Krampus,’ she said solemnly.

‘Hey, Doctor!’ came a shout. It was Turlough. ‘What’s going on?’

‘Turlough, you’re safe,’ said the Doctor. ‘I thought you were still in the barn.’

‘I didn’t see you rushing to get me out,’ said Turlough, raising an eyebrow.

‘Is he still in there…?’ The Doctor trailed off, staring at the barn.

Turlough nodded. In the distance, Max could hear a fire engine’s siren start to wail. ‘We’ve got to try and get him out…’ The Doctor made a move towards the building, but Turlough caught hold of his arm. There was a crash from inside the barn, as one of the beams collapsed and the flames seemed to jump and lick higher into the sky.

‘Don’t play the hero,’ said Max. ‘There’s nobody in there.’

‘There was the Krampus, Dad,’ said Lukas. ‘We’ve killed him.’

Turlough looked at Lukas in astonishment.

‘And to think we were trying to save the children from *him*,’ he said.

The Doctor gazed into the flames as the sound of sirens got closer.

‘Well, I suppose we can go then, Doctor. There’s not much more to do here. Or do you want to stay for the *Krampuslauf*?’ The Doctor carried on gazing into the fire. Through the screeching sirens, the

Sebastianskirche bells started to chime midnight.

‘We’ve *killed* the Krampus,’ said Lukas, tugging at his dad’s sleeve.

‘They have, you know,’ added Turlough in an undertone.

Lukas nodded vigorously. ‘And now I can be naughty all year…’

Max laughed at his son’s serious face.

‘Oh, you think so?’ he asked, ruffling his hair.

‘Yes,’ said Lukas. ‘He’s dead and gone.’

‘But didn’t you know? said Max, opening his eyes wide in mock

horror. ‘There’s not just one Krampus. There are hundreds and

thousands of them. So killing one won’t make any difference to you.’

Lukas’s face fell.

‘That’s not true,’ he said hesitantly. ‘Is it?’ He looked at the Doctor and Turlough for confirmation. Turlough shrugged. The Doctor turned round from the fire.

‘No, it doesn’t seem to make a difference to you, at all.’

There was an awkward silence. Max looked at his son and the two strangers. He looked at Katharina comforting Vanessa a little way away. He looked at the burning barn. And suddenly, Max found he wasn’t sure what he believed any more.

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They Fell

Scott Handcock

An Adventure of the Eighth Doctor, with Charley

Some say that angels are emissaries of God, sent to warn the human race of our sins and our betrayals. Others believe that they have come here to protect us, to save us from ourselves and from each other. They are the best of each of us, and walk across the world in human form, across time...

But sometimes angels fall...

It was Christmas Eve when the Angels come for Zoe Elliot. They descended from the Heavens, the last of their kind, just for her. That little human girl who meant so much to them...

One little girl against the Angels...

She was six years old.

‘That doesn’t sound good...’

The Doctor was already dashing from panel to panel on the TARDIS console, flicking switches and triple-checking readouts, a ripple of turbulence having overwhelmed the control chamber just moments before. Sparks rained down from the girders, hitting the controls and dancing across his fingers.

Then he heard her, groaning quietly at his feet.

‘You all right?’ he asked.

Charley moaned again, wrenching herself up from the TARDIS

floor, clutching at the central console for support. She forced herself onto the controls as a second wave ripped through the chamber, then a third, followed by a fourth, each with less force than the last.

'That should be the worst of it,' the Doctor announced cheerily,

whipping around the panels once again. 'Four dimensions, see!'

Another wave rocked the TARDIS.

'Five dimensions, sorry. My mistake! Why do I always forget the

fifth?'

Charley smiled. 'Any idea what caused it?'

'Not a clue,' the Doctor confessed. 'Still, we can worry about that 139

once we've landed!'

He slammed a lever down hard on the console, and the TARDIS

shuddered into life, knocking Charley off-balance in the process. The Doctor smiled apologetically in her direction.

'Sixth dimension,' he insisted. 'Honest!'

Every year, Zoe Elliot would sit on her window sill for hours on end, gazing blissfully up towards the stars for any sign of Santa and his sleigh. But there was never any Santa. No sleigh. Not even a hint of antler. Just the empty mass of space hanging above her, beyond her world...

She had to stay awake. She was never quite sure why she had to, just that she did. And, every year, she somehow knew that this time was never wasted.

She never did meet Santa.

Earlier that evening, snow had started to fall. Slowly at first, but picking up as the night went on. Zoe studied it all that time, for hours on end, staring at the world outside her window. She could account for each and every flake as they tumbled from the sky, so delicate, so alone, so lost.

Deep within those snowdrifts, something was waiting, lurking,

searching. It didn't know quite what for yet, but it knew whatever it was had to be out there, somewhere, hiding on this primitive world.

The stars had told it as much.

All it needed now – all *they* needed, in fact–was the strength to find it.

Zoe didn't notice when the power cut outside, nor when a tall blue box shimmered into being at the bottom of her street. All she could

perceive that night was a simple vortex, swirling majestically around outside her home. A Christmas blizzard.

Her parents came upstairs with Nan just after nine, and tucked her into bed. They told her a story, and brought hot chocolate. Her mother kissed her goodnight.

Then Zoe closed her eyes.

Charley noticed an expression of bewilderment flicker across the

Doctor's eyes. 'What is it?' she urged. 'What happened?'

'We fell,' explained the Doctor casually. 'Not sure how, or why, but we fell. Right out of the vortex.'

'And is that bad?'

'Don't know. Never done it before!' The Doctor paused, seemingly

not too impressed with his own explanation. 'Still, shouldn't be too hard to find out! Well, not if you're me, anyway...'

He darted round the TARDIS again, stabbing at buttons, yanking at levers, and throwing in the occasional flicked switch for good measure.

The console chirruped quietly in response, and the Doctor grinned.

'Is that good?' Charley asked. 'Is the TARDIS okay?'

'Okay?' he asked. 'She's brilliant! Hear that?' He nodded towards the electronic twitter buzzing from the console. 'It's a distress signal of some sort. The old thing must have heard it and locked herself on course.'

‘So that’s what the turbulence was?’

‘Simple emergency landing,’ the Doctor clarified, ‘only not so

simple in this case, and not our emergency.’

‘Makes a change.’ Charley smirked.

‘Precisely! Now, listen to that for me, would you?’

‘What am I listening for?’

‘Anything. Everything. I’m just trying to work out what it’s saying!’

The Doctor thumped the console harder, tilting his head towards its makeshift speaker grille. A-ha, repeated sequence! Thought as much!

Not a live transmission, then.’ He paused, studying the message more closely. ‘Funny, sounds like some sort of question...’

Suddenly intrigued, the Doctor slammed the signal off, and yanked down the scanner, watching as the snow-covered street flickered into view. He turned towards Charley, offering his arm.

‘Fancy a stroll, Miss Pollard?’

She was already out the door.

It was 11 o’clock, and Zoe’s clumsy stealth was threatening to wake her parents again. Floorboards croaked, and her heart pounded, blood pumping through her eardrums. She was so scared, but so excited at the same time.

She was going to meet Santa.

Her plan was simple. She could sneak downstairs while her parents slept, and wait for Santa in the living room. That’s where he always left their presents, anyway.

Now she was crouched at the top of the staircase, peering through the banisters at the darkness below. She took a step forward, as quietly as she could – followed by another, then another – and made her way slowly down the stairs.

She tried the hallway light switch.

Nothing.

It waited for her high above. It studied her every move, her every breath, her every thought.

It watched as the little girl made her way down the passageway, and 141

into the living room, all the while fearful of her own home, her own family. The night was dark, but it could see so clearly.

Such vision...

It watched as Zoe entered the room, following her from gift to gift, listening to her childish mind, spinning with all that excitement. It noticed the figure moments before she did. A single creature sat alone in the darkness, waiting for her.

Zoe froze as a cough erupted from the shadows.

And the Angels fell once more...

'Sorry to disturb you,' the Doctor muttered, as another door was

slammed in his face. Charley snapped her fingers through the letterbox, adding a festive, 'Seasons greetings, and all that!'

Neither of them heard the reply that followed.

Number 14 had been their seventh attempt in a street of nearly forty houses. It was an unconventional approach to tracking a distress signal, Charley thought, but after all this time she knew all too well that the Doctor was an unconventional type of fellow.

'Is this actually getting us anywhere, Doctor?' she asked, almost knowing what the answer would be.

He hesitated for a moment, before Number 22 offered up a similar

rejection.

'Probably not,' the Doctor mumbled, whisking the sonic screwdriver from his pocket. He held it up to the flurry in front of them and listened intently, the screwdriver pulsing, rising and falling, as it surveyed the area around them. The Doctor span round the street, circling himself, then thrust the device back into his pocket.

Charley looked at him in anticipation.

‘Too many traces,’ he sighed. ‘Meaning that this thing either

scattered itself on impact, or...’

‘Or, there’s more than one of them out there?’

The Doctor nodded grimly. ‘Whatever this thing is, Charley, it’s all around us. It always has been...’

He turned slowly, gazing back towards the sanctuary of the

TARDIS. ‘It summoned us here, and now it’s willing us to find it.

Somewhere deep within those snowdrifts, it’s been studying us, our every move, every thought.’

Charley shivered.

‘Just think about it, though! All that energy... all that time, alone, in the darkness, waiting. Simply waiting...’ He flashed Charley one of his most enthusiastic grins. ‘Exciting, isn’t it?’

But Charley didn’t answer. Instead, she pointed in the direction of Number 35, a sickly glow emanating from one of its bedrooms.

The Doctor followed her gaze, and ran.

‘Nan,’ Zoe whispered. ‘Nan, are you awake?’

Her grandmother dozed in the armchair, and groaned an insensible

denial.

‘Nan, please, I think I heard someone! There’s someone outside. I think they’re burglars or something. Please, I don’t know what to do!

What should I do, Nanny? Please tell me...’

But her grandmother never answered, and Zoe was left alone.

One little girl against the Angels...

It watched with fascination as the girl steadied herself, steeled against the night, and moved towards the windows. Her heart was pounding in her chest, so hard, so afraid of what might happen to her that night.

But she was determined, poor little soul. Nothing would steal

Christmas from her family that night. Not if she could stop it.

The Angel imagined her distress, and sang.

The voices were nearer now, Zoe could hear them: a man and a

woman, struggling to climb over the fence. She listened as they fell into her garden, footsteps crunching through the snow, creeping closer and closer to the house. They were laughing together, chatting

together...

Then everything fell silent.

Zoe waited for another sign from her intruders, but it never came.

All she heard instead was her breathing, and blood. She could actually hear it: her own blood, throbbing through her ears, so loud and with such fury. It almost overwhelmed her.

Then she heard the Angel, its singing from on High, and it watched her as she edged the curtains open. She stared out through the glass to the wilderness beyond, watching for intruders in the snow...

She saw nothing.

There was no man, no woman; just her own reflection, standing

before her in the window like a ghost. And that's when she felt it, the pain, gushing through her body without warning: bony fingers clawing at her skull, ripping away the hair from her little human scalp...

'Are you the One?' her grandmother hissed.

Zoe shook her head and screamed, louder than she'd ever screamed

before. But again, the enquiry came: 'Are you the One?'

Questions started racing through her mind.

Why was her nanny doing this to her? Had Zoe really been so bad

before, so naughty? Maybe she deserved this? Was it Christmas Day yet? Could she stop the pain? Could she tear herself away? Were the

burglars stlll outside? Were they coming to kill? Would her parents
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come to save her, and would she get in trouble if she told them what had happened?

Had they got her that new bicycle she wanted?

Was she the One?

The back door slammed, and Zoe knew the intruders were inside.

She struggled to maintain her silence through the torture, and even the old woman seemed to hesitate, her grip over the girl beginning to slacken and falter.

Zoe pulled herself free, and collapsed towards the sofa, screaming into its cushions as she fell.

Then footsteps.

A joke.

Laughter.

The strangers were advancing through the house now, and Zoe

started running for her life. She belted through the hallway, leaping up the staircase, two steps at a time, scrabbling on the landing for support.

A voice floated up from the living room.

‘Please, child,’ her grandmother called. ‘Tell me you’re the One...’

But Zoe didn’t know, didn’t understand what any of this was about.

There was no alternative...

She burst into her parents’ bedroom and shrieked at them for help, demanding their protection from Nan downstairs. As their daughter, this was her right, and she didn’t care how much trouble she got into for disturbing them this late at night. Not that she believed fora moment she could get into much more.

She’d expected them to say it was a nightmare, that they might let her sleep with them, or something. But instead, her parents were just

standing at the far end of the room, eyes locked shut, staring out of the window to the skies. They'd been standing in their nightclothes,

waiting for Zoe to find them. Then they heard their daughter's cries, and turned.

'Are you the One?' they asked their little girl in unison. The

staggered back towards the door and fled.

Her parents had gone, and in their place stood something else

entirely. The Angels had descended.

Zoe hurried to her bedroom and, as she did so, noticed her

grandmother out of the corner of her eye, rising slowly up the staircase after her. Zoe knew that the old woman was staring at her, somehow, even though her eyes were still closed tight. It was studying her, even now, still trying to work out what she was. Maybe even *why* she was...

She shut herself into the bedroom, and squeezed into the gap

between the doorframe and the bedstead, pressing her feet against the door to keep it closed, to keep them out. She did this whenever her 144

mother shouted at her, and it had always succeeded in keeping her out before now. But Mummy had Nanny and Daddy on her side that night, and Zoe couldn't even begin to predict what might happen to her if they got into her bedroom.

The doorknob rattled, and Zoe instinctively forced herself harder into the crevice, denying her family access. Not that they were her family any more, she knew that. They couldn't be...

At least, she hoped they weren't.

'Guessing it's not your distress call, then?' a voice whispered. Zoe's head snapped around as a figure crept out from the shadows behind her.

It was a woman – one of the burglars. She'd forgotten all about

them. Not that this one seemed especially dressed for a robbery, mind.

She was in some sort of casual trouser suit, with a heavy black coat wrapped tightly all around her. She had a scarf and a bobble hat too, different from the rest of the outfit, and Zoe could just about make out a wave of blonde-brown hair straying from the collar.

The woman sat down next to her and shoved her own boors against

the doorframe. The rattling stopped.

‘My name’s Charley,’ the woman told her, ‘I’m here to help.’

Zoe couldn’t find the words to answer, simply nodded, and her feet fell slowly from the door. Indicating that Zoe should get behind her, the stranger got up and, twisted the handle, pulling the door back ever so gently towards her. Placing herself between Zoe and the corridor she peered through the crack in the doorframe.

Everything was silent, and the woman slid her hand into Zoe’s and guided her slowly outside.

Out on the landing, Zoe’s family had arranged themselves in a kind of silent conference, and were stood around each other, arms intertwined, heads angled unnaturally. Their eyes were still closed, but they seemed to be conversing. Even though she was trying to be strong for the poor girl who stood trembling behind her, Charley felt her skin crawl.

It was as if they were in communion.

When the uncanny trio sensed their daughter’s presence, they broke position and twisted themselves to confront her, blank faces cocked slightly to one side. When they started to advance, Zoe and Charley were already at the bottom of the staircase, struggling with the front door and its catches.

Then a whine from outside, and the door burst open, the Doctor

hauling them both out onto the snowy driveway, sonic screwdriver

firmly in hand.

‘What are you doing here?’ Charley asked.

‘What do you mean, what am I doing here? Where did you expect

me to be?' The Doctor stuck his head into the hallway, checking for anyone else Charley might have had with her. Instead, he only saw the family massing at the bottom of the staircase.

'Oh, that's not good,' he muttered, closing the door behind him. He turned his attentions back to Charley. 'Well?'

'I thought you were up in the bedroom,' she explained.

The Doctor boggled. 'What on earth would I be doing in a

bedroom?'

'I don't know!'

'Seriously though: a bedroom? Me?'

Charley glared at him. 'You said it –'

A bang from the door, which the Doctor fused with a quick swipe of the screwdriver 'And so to business...' He crouched down next to Zoe.

'What's your name, then?' he asked.

'Zoe,' the little girl mumbled. 'Zoe Elliot.'

'Zoe Elliot,' the Doctor mused. 'That's a lovely name, isn't it? Two lovely names, in fact!'

Charley rolled her eyes, and the Doctor hurried himself along. 'But, yes, anyway, look, I'm afraid I've got a few things to take care of right now, Zoe, but Charley here's going to look after you and keep you safe until I get back.'

He paused, and pointed down the street. 'There's a magical blue box just down the road – can you see it? It's not as small as it looks, so you should be safe in there until everything's back to normal. Is that all right?'

Zoe nodded her consent, and was carried through the snowdrifts to the TARDIS.

Behind the Doctor came the sound of splintering wood. There in the wreckage of Number 35's front door stood the family, monitoring the Time Lord's antics through the shelter of their eyelids. He strode to meet them on the middle of the driveway, and raised the sonic

screwdriver to their faces.

Not even a flinch.

He advanced upon the father, and began examining his body with

caution, forcing open his eyes and using the screwdriver to perform a scan around the cranium. It chirruped quietly to itself, job complete, and the Doctor took a slow step backwards from the trio in front of him. It all made sense: the distress signal, the temperature drops, the unexpected power cut...

He cleared his throat quietly and requested the simplest of answers.

'Can you see me?' he asked.

They nodded.

'You can see me, even though your eyes are closed?'

Another nod.

'Do you even know what eyes are?'

They shook their heads.

'Just as I thought.' The Doctor smiled. 'These aren't your bodies at all, are they? You've just inhabited them to get closer to Zoe!'

The family was confused.

'What is Zoe?' the mother asked. The name was new to her.

The Doctor sighed. 'Zoe's the little girl you've been terrifying, whose home you invaded...'

'She is the One?' the grandmother inquired.

'The one what? I'm sorry, I'm not very good at this kind of thing.

Can't even get to grips with cryptic crosswords.'

'You misunderstand,' the father continued. 'She is the One, our

child. We have returned for her.'

‘But you’re not her parents,’ the Doctor retaliated. ‘You’re not even human. You do know that, don’t you?’

‘We are not human,’ the family agreed.

‘Then what are you doing here? Why come all this way for Zoe

Elliot?’

‘She is the One,’ they repeated.

‘Yes, you’ve said that, but it still makes absolutely zero sense.’

‘But she is the One! We know it.’

The Doctor sighed, relented for a second. ‘Fine. Tell me, then. What exactly is the One?’

Without answering, Zoe’s ‘mother’ stepped forward and with every

step, a sickly turquoise glow tippled across her skin. Finally her eyes snapped open and streams of energy snaked into the cold, night air.

Slowly, almost beautifully, an image began to form, a translucent wraith floating above the discarded host body which crumpled into a heap in the snow.

The Doctor moved to the prone form, checking quickly for a pulse

and the father and grandmother performed a similar ceremony,

revealing their true nature. Now ready for what would happen, the Doctor caught the remaining members of the Elliot family, taking

particular care to help the frail, but unharmed, grandmother to the ground.

Above him, the creatures intertwined, merging into one bright,

brilliant figure that undulated in the wind that whipped the snow into a frenzy.

‘And lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them…’ the Doctor said softly, rising back to his feet.

‘This is how we exist now,’ the Angel explained, dancing in the

blizzard above his head. ‘We live as one.’

‘All three of you?’ the Doctor asked.

The Angel gestured confirmation. ‘Life wasn’t always like this.’

‘Really?’ The Doctor’s curiosity was piqued now. ‘What were you

like before? Tell me...’

‘We were as the One is now,’ declared the creature. ‘It was created in order to maintain our true shape.’

‘Zoe, you mean? I’m sorry, I still don’t understand.’

The Angel hesitated.

‘A plague came to our planet,’ it started, ‘a virus that would

devastate our world. We lost our shapes, our bodies mutating beyond recognition. We three united before the end came. We gave birth to our people’s final child – the One – and cast it out into the depths of space: the last true survivor of our kind.’

‘And that’s what you think Zoe is?’ the Doctor interrupted.

‘She can restore us to our proper state. When the One fell upon this world, we kept records of its location, and traced the constellations once millennia had passed and the epidemic was eradicated.’ It smiled.

‘This is where the stars instructed us to come.’

The words hung in the air, as a sadness passed across the Doctor’s face. He shook his head, damp locks flicking back and forth.

‘I’m so sorry.’

The Angel shifted once more, its colours darkening in confusion.

‘We do not understand.’

‘It’s the way of the universe. Space changes like everything else,’

the Doctor began. ‘Constellations shift, stars die, only to be reborn

elsewhere. Then, there are black holes and, trust me, they're a different kettle of fish entirely. If that virus raged across your world for millennia, then your coordinates are wrong! Your child would have been lost to an ever-growing universe, long, long ago.'

'But, this Zoe, she is –'

'An ordinary little girl with no hope of saving you or your people,'

the Doctor explained. 'She's not the One.'

'But this is impossible,' the Angel raged, twisting in on itself in anger. 'We followed the stars, they never change!'

If the Doctor didn't know better, he'd think it was weeping with

frustration.

'Look,' he stumbled, his voice laced with awkwardness and

uncertainty, 'I probably shouldn't do this, but I might be able to help you.'

The Angel glared at him.

'Consider it a little Christmas gift,' the Doctor added, indicating that 148

it should follow him to the TARDIS.

It was five o'clock in the morning when Zoe Elliot finally climbed into bed. It had been a busy night.

First, she'd been attacked by her family, rescued by the Doctor, and taken to the depths of outer space. She'd watched as the Doctor had run in circles around the controls of his ship under the watchful gaze of the sad Angel. Then, after he'd whooped and shouted 'Eureka!' she'd

helped reunite a family and played with an alien child on another planet.

Now she was back in bed, on Christmas morning, waiting for Santa

to show up. Her parents were in the room next door and she could hear Nan snoring down the corridor. The Doctor had said they would be

fine, more than fine in fact, before he'd repaired the front door and vanished into the night. As the clock ticked on, it was as if none of it had actually happened. But, it had, hadn't it?

She checked her alarm clock. It was five am.

Zoe screwed her eyes tightly shut and forced her head into her pillow for a few seconds and tried to get to sleep.

Then she double-checked the clock. No doubt about it: definitely

five.

Time to wake Mummy and Daddy up, she thought.

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The Christmas Presence

Simon Barnard & Paul Morris

An Adventure of the Second Doctor, with Jamie

It wasn't the tinsel, hung in sad little loops throughout the nursing home's musty corridors, that had given Chas the hump – though it had unarguably seen better days. Nor was it the traditionally overcooked Christmas dinner, appalling though that was. All of this was to be expected. What had really given Chas the hump this particular festive season was the alien in Room 23.

Chas had seen a lot of Christmases in the home, more than he cared to remember. In the chintzy twilight prison that was Lavender House, the rest of the year trickled one grey day into the next; but Christmas was different. Christmas was Chas's favourite time of year. Christmas was when Chas received his present.

It was on Christmas Day 1918 that the first present arrived. Early that morning, in an unremarkable tenement flat in Whitechapel, an excellent briar pipe from Peterson of Dublin appeared at the foot of Chas's cot, and lay there unnoticed. Being born just six weeks earlier, Chas didn't appreciate the quality of such a fine gift, and its arrival was also of little concern to his mother. Her mind was elsewhere.

One year later, and Chas was left a shiny silver pocket watch,

inscribed 'To my dearest Reginald, with all my love, S.'

‘And can I interest sir in today’s special?’

Chas took a deep breath and smiled weakly. Every day the nurse said the same thing.

‘Two red, two white. Open wide!’

Chas opened his mouth and dutifully swallowed the pills, noting

with some disapproval a small tattoo on the nurse’s ample bosom as she leant over him.

‘Did you get my book?’ he asked.

‘They didn’t have your spaceman story,’ said the nurse. ‘Looks like someone’s had away with it. But they did have this,’ she added,

reaching into her bag. ‘It’s about the Battle of Jutland. Second World 150

War. Maybe you were there, that’s what I was thinking. Were you

there?’

‘No,’ said Chas. wasn’t.’

Funnily enough, it was on the day that Chas didn’t get his spaceman book that the alien arrived at Lavender House. Of course, he didn’t look like an alien. Not like the ones in the stories Chas liked to read.

No, he looked like a 76-year-old man called Malcolm.

Malcolm arrived in a taxi two weeks before Christmas. No anxious

relatives dropped Malcolm off, nor did Malcolm appear to have any possessions bar a suitcase. And as he watched the new arrival from the window of the television lounge, this struck Chas as very odd indeed.

Who ‘S’ was, the infant Chas did not know – but then again, he didn’t know who he was either, though he was fairly sure he wasn’t Reginald.

The origin of the watch was a mystery in itself. It wasn’t a gift from his parents. His father had fallen on the muddy fields of Valenciennes, and the previous Christmas his grieving mother had taken her own life. The Sisters at St Joseph’s Orphanage had no idea who could have left a silver pocket watch for their young charge, but concluded it was

most probably a present from the Lord.

The following Christmas morning the Lord left two-year-old Chas a small plastic object with the word 'Nokia' across the top. When Chas pressed the numbers on the front it made a funny noise and lit up. Chas thought it an excellent my.

'Good morning, ladies,' said Malcolm, and smiled, displaying what seemed to Chas to be far too many teeth. The ladies in question cooed and cackled appreciatively.

'You're a nice young man, what's your name?' rasped Mrs Trout, 91.

'Malcolm Harbottle, ma'am. I'm taking up residence at Lavender

House for the foreseeable.' He attempted a small bow.

'What lovely manners!' shrieked Mrs Snuff, 85. 'Hasn't he got

lovely manners?'

'Lovely,' agreed Mrs Trout

'You'd better watch her, Mr Harbottle.'

'Had I?'

'I think she's sweet on you! Aren't you, Mrs Trout?'

Mrs Trout laughed. Malcolm kept nodding and smiling, but the

smile never reached his eyes. He had, thought Chas, the cold, dead eyes of a shark.

Chas hadn't always believed in Father Christmas. Like all eight-year-olds, he'd had doubts. In 1926, Chas went to bed at his customary time 151

of half-past seven, smuggling with him a candle and box of matches.

He pretended to sleep until his foster family had gone to bed, then lit the candle and sat up straight. This year he would see who was leaving him presents.

Chas woke the next morning with the candle burnt to nothing beside him and a half-remembered dream about a small, scruffy man in

checked trousers. In his dream the man said, ‘There, there,’ and played a strange, soothing nine on his recorder. He had a very kind face.

Rubbing sleep from his eyes, Chas discovered a large leather-bound book by his bed, which when he opened screamed loudly and flew out of the window.

Even if he didn’t look quite how he imagined, and even if he left him strangely inappropriate presents, Chas was left in no doubt at all that Father Christmas did exist.

After taking his leave of Mrs Trout and Mrs Snuff, Malcolm retired to his room and stayed there until the evening. Chas began watching a programme about decorating houses, but as he didn’t have a house to decorate he found it rather trying, so wheeled his way back to his room. He had just opened his new library book – which was quite

good, despite being about things that had really happened – when he heard a peculiar sawing noise. It was coming from across the corridor, in room 23. It stopped; Chas shook his head and resumed reading. He had just reached an especially exciting passage about Franz von Hipper when the noise of hammering interrupted him. This was very curious.

He wheeled his way across to room 23, and rapped on the door.

‘Mr Harbottle?’

There was no answer.

‘Mr Harbottle, are you there?’

A pause, then...

‘Yes, who’s that?’

‘It’s Chas. Chas Baxter. From number 22. Just wondered if you

needed a hand unpacking? Mr Harbottle?’

Silence.

Chas tried the door.

‘Well, I’ll be jiggered,’ he said, and scratched his head. Malcolm had put a lock on the door.

In 1932, Chas woke with a start. Somebody was in his room – the

scruffy man from his dream. Father Christmas. He was accompanied

by another man, wearing what appeared to be a skirt. They talked in hushed voices.

'Are you sure he'll like it?' said the younger of the two, in a soft 152

Scottish brogue. 'I mean, if I was 13...'

'Don't fuss, Jamie, of course he'll like it.'

Only when Father Christmas and his helper had left the room did

Chas dare to breathe, and saw by his bed a book with a bright cover. It was *Sunset of the Megatheron*, by A. K. Cheesewright, and on the back it explained that it was a thrilling story about how evil aliens lived amongst us. He opened it and flicked through the first few pages. The date of publication was 1982; a misprint, he supposed.

By half past nine that evening he had finished the book, and his life, he realised, would never be the same again.

One night at about two o'clock, Chas woke as usual to the insistent call of his bladder, and with a sigh reached under his bed for the chamber pot. As he did so, he became aware of a shimmering light stretching into his room from beneath the door. Mrs Trout must have left the television on again, he decided. But when the following night the same light appeared, Chas took it upon himself to investigate. Opening his door, he saw the iridescent glow from beneath the door of the room across the corridor – room 23. It twisted and shivered like the northern lights on a faraway horizon.

The war came. As Chas had never been to the seaside before, he joined the Royal Navy. Christmas 1940, and Santa left Chas a knitted bobble hat, which was nice, though as he was serving in the Mediterranean he didn't get much use from it. Chas missed the bobble hat a year later when he found himself floating on a life raft in the freezing night-time ocean. Unfortunately it was sitting on the ocean floor along with his ship, the *HMS Audacity*, victim of a predatory U-boat.

Waking on the raft five hundred miles west of Cape Finisterre the following morning, Chas realised it was Christmas Day. Next to him was a box of chocolates, with all the hazelnut whirls missing.

Something was amiss at Lavender House Retirement Home. Items of

personal property were disappearing. One lunchtime in the television lounge Mr Fox, 78, cleared his throat.

‘I can’t find my pipe anywhere,’ he said.

No one answered him, so Mr Fox continued.

‘My pipe’s gone missing. My briar.’

No one said anything for a second time, so Mr Fox went back to

sleep. Malcolm surreptitiously lifted his fork and impaled a passing fly, which he then ate. There was something not quite right about Malcolm.

On Christmas Eve 1943, Chas went to a dance at Bromley town hall, where he trod on several people’s feet and met a pretty girl called 153

Irene. She worked for the ATS, and drove an ambulance, badly. She had only been given half a day’s driving instruction, and the

destruction she wrought on London’s roads put the *Luftwaffe* to shame.

That night, Father Christmas brought Chas some nylon tights, which, not having much use for, he gave to Irene. She was impressed, and when the war was over, they married.

Chas liked Irene because, unlike some girls, she was sensible as well as pretty. And Irene liked Chas, even though he did insist on filling up their house with his silly books. Her mother had warned her that all men have pointless hobbies, and his was to read books about

spaceships and Martians. It could be worse. Her sister’s husband, Derek, liked to go fishing, and kept a bucket of worms in the fridge.

The following evening, Mrs Snuff cleared her throat too. ‘Someone has stolen my tights,’ she announced.

This didn’t have the desired reaction, so she banged the table as hard as her arthritis would permit. Matron’s ginger cat stopped licking its left thigh and looked curiously at her. One by one the other occupants turned their gaze towards Mrs Snuff, and when she was certain of their attention she declared, somewhat portentously, ‘We have a thief among us!’

Mrs Trout tutted and shook her head. Malcolm nodded concernedly,

then excused himself, and followed Matron's cat as it ambled from the room.

Irene's driving did not improve. On Friday 5 December 1952, she was driving her Morris Oxford home from work when a dense, smoke-sodden fog descended on London. Despite being able to see barely a metre in front of her, Irene carried on regardless, in wholly the wrong direction. She drove all the way to Vauxhall, where she proceeded to drive off the bridge and into the Thames. That Christmas, Chas was given a rather nice pair of pink lady's slippers, size five.

Lavender House Retirement Home was in uproar. Matron was forced

to call a crisis meeting for residents and staff, for only the second time since the great handbag debacle of 1991.

'We have an evildoer in our midst,' she said, darkly. 'When I catch the perpetrator – and make no mistake, I *will* catch the perpetrator – the consequences will be *very – serious – indeed*.'

'It's not nice, is it?' observed Mrs Snuff.

'It's not,' said Mrs Trout, and broke wind loudly, waking up Mr

Fox, who shouted 'Treskilling yellow!' for no obvious reason.

* * *

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Chas never remarried – it wouldn't have been right. Instead he lived on at the suburban semi the couple had shared, unfailingly courteous to his neighbours, and well liked by his colleagues at the bank, particularly for his habit of buying each of their children a Christmas present. 'It's not as if I've got anyone else to buy for, is it?' he argued, bringing tears to the eyes of some of the more sensitive members of staff.

Overall, he led a solitary sort of life. The highlight of his week was the Saturday-morning trip to the library in search of the latest science-fiction anthology. All he needed in life was his books, his faithful books. Well, them, and the music of the Band of the Royal Marines.

And if he wanted to march around his living room to Colonel Bogey

from time to time, what was wrong with that?

Chas had, through one reason and another, spent most of his life on his own, and it was looking as though the rest would unfold the same way. But he wasn't bitter. In fact, he didn't really mind how little of the love he gave out was reciprocated, from week to week or month to month, because he knew that somebody cared for him, at least for one day a year. Father Christmas.

Christmas Day dawned at Lavender House. For a few moments, Chas

was seven years old again. A crisp early morning sun was breaking through the curtains, and in the half-light he looked around for his present. Usually it was at the foot of his bed, but not this year. Perhaps, he thought, it had slid underneath. With some difficulty, Chas

manoeuvred himself onto the floor, and scoured the carpet Nothing, save for his trusty old chamber pot He checked his watch. This was really very peculiar. Father Christmas should have been by now.

Chas felt a strange sense of unreality overtake him. His mouth felt dry. This couldn't be happening.

Father Christmas had forgotten him.

The morning passed in subdued contemplation. Despite having little enthusiasm for food, Chas reluctantly hauled himself off his bed and went to Christmas dinner.

Today, more than ever, it took an effort of will to wheel himself across the communal area to his allotted place at the long dining table.

He rolled past the threadbare plastic tree, his wheels crunching over a couple of loose baubles and grinding them into the ghastly vomit-coloured carpet tiles. He tried to force a smile at the staff, arrayed in serried ranks and all wearing their regulation uniform of jaunty paper hat and mismatched tinsel scarf. Then he manoeuvred himself into

position and half-heartedly put on his own hat, reflecting that, as ever, it was far too small and would undoubtedly make his already

protruding ears look even more ridiculously oversized.

Malcolm leant across the table and proffered a cracker. ‘Happy

Christmas!’ he said and smiled, displaying some ginger fur stuck in his teeth. ‘And what did Father Christmas bring you, eh?’

Chas’s troubles vanished in an instant, as two important and

horrifying facts suddenly struck him.

Malcolm had stolen his present. And Malcolm was an alien.

By late afternoon the post-prandial entertainments had mostly died away, leaving the communal room a battleground of lost tiddlywinks, half-finished games of gin rummy, and barely started Monopoly

matches. But Chas and Malcolm remained, facing each other across the domino table like two elderly grandmasters.

‘You not played this before?’ asked Chas, as he deftly scooped

another half a dozen two-pence pieces from Malcolm’s pile and added them to his. For the briefest fraction of a second Malcolm seemed on the brink of anger. Then he calmly pushed his dominoes into the centre of the table.

‘As I said, Mr Baxter, we don’t have this game where I am from.’

‘But where can that be, I wonder? You sound as English as me.’

‘No, I’m not from England,’ Malcolm said. ‘Are we playing again?’

‘Somewhere in Britain, then?’ Chas persevered, then added: ‘Up to you.’

‘No, I’m not from Britain.’

Chas took a breath, then ventured, ‘I think I can guess where you’re from.’

‘Oh, yes?’

‘Mars,’ Chas said brightly. ‘Or Pluto.’

Malcolm grimaced, then ran his tongue over his teeth, where one last piece of fur still clung. ‘I think not.’

‘You think you’re not a Martian, or not a Plutonian?’

‘I think,’ Malcolm said, though gritted teeth, ‘That I shan’t play again.’ He fixed Chas in his cold, piscine gaze. ‘Would you excuse me, Mr Baxter. I’m going to retire to the television lounge.’

‘Fair enough,’ said Chas.

Malcolm left, his expression unreadable. Chas chuckled quietly over his little joke, and was only sorry that more people hadn’t been around to hear it. Then his eyes fixed on the small pile of coins that Malcolm had left on the table in his hurry to leave. Among the familiar pieces of shrapnel were several that Chas didn’t recognise; among those was a key. A strangely shaped key, to be sure, made of an odd purplish metal, but a key nonetheless. Malcolm had slipped up. This was his chance.

* * *

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Chas wheeled himself cautiously through the corridors till he reached room 23. He reached out and tried the key in the door. His hand was shaking; he felt like the naughty schoolboy he’d never been. The door opened. Pushing his way in, it took a few seconds for his eyes to adjust to the dusty gloom. Malcolm’s room was bare. No photos, no pictures, no possessions. Just the suitcase, the same suitcase Malcolm had

arrived with, sitting on the sideboard.

He tried the key again, by now barely breathing with anticipation.

The case slid open with polished ease. Inside was a bizarre collection of objects – some of them oddly familiar. A pipe. Jewellery, lots of jewellery. *The Standard Catalogue of the Postage Stamps of the World*, 1992 Edition. Mrs Snuffs tights. A mobile phone. Pink slippers. A silver pocket watch. And resting on top of the assorted junk was the most extraordinary item of all: a transparent globe full of light.

Chas held it up, his face bathed in a beautiful shimmering glow.

Inside, a hundred spinning worlds danced around a flaming star. Chas thought it the most beautiful thing he’d ever seen. It was more vivid than the climax of *Star Eaters of Altair*, his favourite story by his favourite writer, A. K. Cheesewright. It was more beautiful even than the cover of *Sunburst over Megathera*.

Chas had not expected to find the meaning of life so late in the day–

and certainly not locked in a suitcase in a nursing home near Reigate –

but there was no denying it Here it was.

Christmas Day drew to a close, and Chas put the globe to his ear. He could hear the roar of a billion voices.

He put on his pyjamas.

There was a knock on the door. ‘Mr Baxter?’ said Malcolm.

‘Just a minute,’ said Chas, and hid the globe under his pillow. He circled round to face the door, and prepared for battle. ‘Come,’ he said, his voice slightly higher than he would’ve liked.

Malcolm came, dressed in a raincoat and carrying his suitcase.

‘Leaving us already?’ said Chas.

Malcolm closed the door behind him. He didn’t look happy. ‘Have

you been in my room?’

Chas drew himself up to his full height, which in his wheelchair was just under four feet, and stared Malcolm levelly in the chest.

‘You took my Christmas present.’

‘What Christmas present?’

‘Admit it I saw the suitcase. You stole Mrs Snuff’s tights. And Mr Fox’s piper

Malcolm shrugged. ‘Give me back the sphere.’

‘You’re a thief, Malcolm Harbottle! And you ate Matron’s cat!

And... and you’re an alien!’

Malcolm blinked. He paused for a second, choosing his words

carefully.

‘You puny Earthling. You *dare* to pit your feeble wits against the might of the Kleptorodon?’

‘The who?’

‘The Kleptorodon. A species feared throughout the seven galaxies!

And of all my kin, it is I who is feared the most. My name is

Malcolm… the Destroyer.’

Chas laughed.

In 1973, Chas woke one morning and remembered it was Christmas. It was cold, very cold, and the early morning light from the window

seemed brighter than usual. He parted the curtains. It was snowing, a crisp layer of white carpeting his garden. At the end of the garden, next to the vegetable patch, Chas was surprised to see a blue police box.

The light on top of it flashed, and it disappeared. Chas shook his head and went back to sleep.

Chas held the globe aloft. It whirled, and danced, and twisted. ‘What is it?’ he asked, hypnotised.

‘It is the Acteon galaxy, most beautiful of all the galaxies of the Gamma Quadrant.’

‘Why do you keep a galaxy in your suitcase?’

‘I collected it,’ said Malcolm.

‘You collect galaxies?’

‘Yes. Now give it to me.’

‘But…’

‘Give it to me, or the consequences will be terrible indeed.’

‘Oh, yes?’ said Chas bravely.

‘Yes. I’ll smash your face in.’

Chas looked down at himself, his thin pyjama-clad torso, his useless

legs. He gripped the wheels of his chair until his knuckles turned white.

There was nothing he could do. He handed the globe to Malcolm.

‘Thank you,’ said Malcolm, and turned on his heel. ‘And now, I

really must be going.’

‘I heard voices,’ said Chas. ‘Thousands, millions of voices’

‘And they all belong to me,’ said Malcolm, and smiled. ‘Goodbye.’

And with that smile Chas suddenly knew that each and every one of those voices needed him to act, and act now.

With a furious cry he launched himself at Malcolm, running over his foot with his wheelchair. Malcolm screamed and threw the globe into the air. They both watched as it slowly spun, and fell, and hit the 158

ground. The room exploded into white light, and Chas was thrown

across the room by the blast. Falling into semi-consciousness, he was still a little surprised to see a big blue box materialise in the corner of his bedroom.

A billion light years away, the inhabitants of the Acteon system

experienced a slight popping of the ears and a momentary feeling of confusion as their galaxy returned to its rightful place in the universe.

Chas blinked as Father Christmas stepped out of the blue box and

looked around, followed by his helper with the skirt.

‘It came from here. A compression field, you see, Jamie?’

Santa’s little helper didn’t see, but nodded anyway.

‘I suspected as much,’ the older man continued. ‘That’s what was

keeping us trapped.’

The elf scratched his head. ‘So what freed us?’

‘I suspect this gentleman may have the answer. Hello?’

Malcolm lay on the floor, dazed.

‘... Malcolm?’

Malcolm looked up and saw the newcomers. He groaned.

‘Malcolm Harbottle! Well, I never!’ exclaimed Father Christmas

delightedly, and grinning a grin that could warm a universe. ‘I thought you were in prison for stealing Inter-Minor? Escape, did you?’

‘Erm. Yes. Hello again,’ said Malcolm sheepishly.

‘Up to your usual tricks, eh? You know these things are outlawed by at least seven Intergalactic Conventions?’

‘Do you two know each other?’ said the elf.

‘Oh, yes,’ said Father Christmas. ‘Jamie, this is Malcolm Harbottle, of the Kleptorodon. An interesting race – sort of intergalactic magpies, aren’t you, Malcolm?’

Malcolm sniffed. ‘We are collectors. The collectors of the cosmos.’

‘Thieves,’ continued Father Christmas. ‘A species with a

pathological desire to steal anything and everything. And Malcolm Harbottle is the worst of them all.’

The elf looked down at Malcolm, who was staring at his kilt with an unhealthy interest. ‘Why?’

‘Malcolm is wanted across the universe for his iniquitous habit of stealing galaxies.’

‘Stealing galaxies? How can you steal a galaxy?’ asked the elf.

‘Why, with a compression field, of course!’ said Father Christmas, clapping his hands together. ‘We could have been trapped in the field indefinitely. For ever. Where is this place, Malcolm?’

‘Earth,’ said Malcolm. ‘A home for old people.’

‘Ingenious! The last place anyone would look. So, Malcolm, what

went wrong?’

‘He did.’ Malcolm pointed to the other side of the bed, where Chas and his wheelchair lay broken. ‘He tried to stop me.’

‘Oh, my goodness,’ said Santa, hurrying to his side. ‘My dear

fellow, are you quite all right?’

Chas wasn’t all right. He opened his eyes and struggled to focus.

‘Father Christmas?’ he murmured.

‘There, there,’ said Father Christmas, cradling his head.

Chas gestured feebly at Malcolm. ‘He’s an alien, Father Christmas.

A bad’un.’

‘Is he, indeed?’ The scruffy, mop-haired man looked at Malcolm, his brow furrowed in disapproval.

‘He stole my Christmas present. Never got one, you see...’

‘Never?’

Chas’s breathing was shallow. ‘Will I get a present?’

‘Of course, of course you will.’

Chas coughed, and looked up apologetically. ‘Thank you, Father.’

Father Christmas leant over Chas, and whispered ‘They aren’t all like him, you know. There are many corners of the universe that have bred the most wonderful things. They must be cherished.’

‘That’s nice to know,’ said Chas.

And then Chas Baxter, 89, closed his eyes, smiled and died.

‘Poor man,’ said the Doctor, shaking his head. ‘We owe him a great deal, Jamie. And not just us. Whole galaxies owe him a debt of

incalculable magnitude.’

‘A worthy adversary,’ nodded Malcolm. ‘Fearless. Even when I told him my name was Malcolm the Destroyer.’

The Doctor said nothing.

Jamie raised an eyebrow. ‘We could give him a present, Doctor...’

‘We? Oh. Jamie, I don’t know...’

‘Ach, he’d never know. Just the one present.’

The Doctor eyed Malcolm’s suitcase, full of stolen treasures from far-off galaxies and a retirement home in Reigate, then smiled broadly.

‘Just the one? Oh, once we’ve replicated this little lot in the TARDIS

and returned them to their rightful owners, I think we can do better than that… don’t you, Malcolm?’

160

Snowman in Manhattan

John Binns

An Adventure of the First Doctor, with Vicki and Steven

3,634 Finnegan Street

Brooklyn

New York

1 January 2008

Hello. And, I guess, Happy New Year.

As you see, I’m starting the year in exactly the way you very

sensibly advised me not to, by dwelling on past events and raking over negative memories; but I like to think it’s in a good cause. You might remember too that you also once gave me advice that setting down the full extent of traumatic events in writing was a positive and useful thing to do. You said it was a therapeutic way of getting them out of my system and translating them to a more manageable form.

So, this is my attempt. And, I have to add, it’s actually pretty crucial to me that you properly get, and I mean fully understand, just what has been happening to me over the last week or so. And given the

fractiousness of our conversations on the subject and the notable tendency you’ve had to shout me down when I try to explain, this

seemed to be the best method. Not to mention of course that it’s the only way if, as you intimated in our last conversation, we’re never going to see each other again.

I guess if I was being really comprehensive, I’d start with looking at how I developed my anxieties about relationships, about my job, and the particular crushing anguish I’ve always had about being in

department stores. Plus, of course, the pretty fundamental existential despair I feel whenever the prospect of another relentlessly commercial and emotionally saccharine ‘holiday season’ rears its ugly head. But I don’t want to be here all week writing this out, and I think your patience would probably wear thin after the first hundred or so pages.

So I’ll cut to the ironic pay-off, where I get to be the duty manager of 161

one of New York’s biggest department stores on a particularly busy Christmas Eve.

You’ve heard the next bit already, of course. But bear with me,

because it’s important to get the detail down as accurately as possible, and you’ll forgive me for thinking you didn’t quite pay much attention the first time. All those protesting cries of disbelief got in the way.

Of course, you were entitled to disbelieve it. Disbelief was a

perfectly rational response, and a fair one to boot.

Wrong, as it turned out, but perfectly fair and rational.

So I’m managing the store on Christmas Eve. I’ve made it to the

toys department, against my better judgement, because one of my

deputies has alerted me to what he euphemistically calls ‘an issue’

regarding our newly hired Santa. And before I know it, my sleeves are being pulled and my field ofvision is being dominated by the very same overzealous brats that made me want to run screaming when the Christmas Eve shift was first offered to me.

I catch sight of our Santa, and immediately overhear him saying

something that makes me realise what my deputy was talking about.

‘Oh, don’t be ridiculous, child,’ he’s saying to the little girl. ‘What possible need could you have for one of those, hmm?’ As I look a bit closer I can see a glimpse of what appears to be a Victorian frock coat underneath the red Santa suit, and a flash of check trousers as he gives what looks like an agitated kick to get the wretched girl off his lap.

‘Be off with you,’ he says sharply. He looks and sounds like he

belongs in another century. I sneakily admire the old man's approach, and have to remember to be annoyed.

I've waded through the mass of children and reached the young man in a suit who I recognise as the new Santa's official manager. Normally the managers don't venture out to the stores unless they're helping out by wearing full elf get-up. This guy looks like he's wearing a costume of another kind. The flared trousers and the wing collars make him look like a refugee from the sixties. It may be nothing more than a gimmick, but to be honest it's already put me on edge.

'Excuse me, but you're...' I ask, looking at my clipboard, 'Steven Taylor?'

'Yes, that's right,' he replies. I hadn't realised he was British. He looks distracted, constantly glancing around him, apparently at other people's shoes.

'We've had some complaints about this new Santa, Mr Taylor,' I

venture as confidently as I can. 'He's tending to upset the children, being a little aggressive.'

Taylor looks at me and has the decency to appear embarrassed. 'Yes, I'm not surprised at that,' he says. 'He's rather new to the job, you 162

see.'

'Could you keep him under control, please? It is Christmas Eve, you know.'

He seems amused by the idea of 'keeping control' of the old guy, but again, apologetic, adds: 'He's a bit of a law unto himself, I'm afraid, but I'll do my best.'

He has the air of someone who'll at least try to keep his word, so I almost leave it at that. But he's back to peering around at people's feet again, so I have to go and ask him the question.

'Look, is there anything I can help you with? I mean, anything

you're looking for in particular?' I'm almost back to my word-perfect shop-floor training.

Taylor stops glancing around him, and I feel a sudden inexplicable sense of dread as he looks back at me with a distinctly hopeful

expression. ‘Yes, I’m looking for a snowman,’ he says earnestly,

‘about so high, with Wellington boots on –’ he’s miming about 25

centimetres tall and one of those Christmas hats.’

I look at him closely, trying to make out if he’s serious. ‘Yeah, that’ll be Snowy Boots,’ I say as helpfully as I can. ‘It’s this year’s must-buy for the kiddies. We’ve got quite a lot of stock, just over here.’

I indicate the display, which is pretty obvious to the eye. About four or five dozen of this year’s number-one toys are staring out at us with their dolefully cute expressions, Wellington boots, and tinsel-threaded scarves.

‘Yes, that’s the fellow,’ says Taylor after a while, ‘except that the one we’re looking for is out of its box. Actually walking around. We’d been tracking it for a while, and then it walked into the store. We thought maybe it was attracted to that.’

He gestures vaguely in the direction of the corner of the room, where there’s a display I don’t recognise themed around what looks like a tall blue cabinet with ‘police box’ stencilled on. I start to think this guy Taylor’s one sandwich short, but I grasp a little desperately at the one thing they did tell us about Snowy Boots in the briefing.

‘Well, I understand there was a story in the press about some kid’s Snowy Boots wandering off when its remote control malfunctioned,

but that was very much a one-off,’ I tell him. ‘The fact that it was near an open manhole at the time was unfortunate, of course.’

Taylor gives me a very strange look in response to this, as if he’s hearing something entirely different to what I think I’m saying.

So I make my excuses and flee to the men’s outfitting department, where I always find it easier to get my bearings and think quietly.

The next thing I know, I’m getting a call from my other deputy,

Sandra. And she’s in the dolls’ department, apparently losing her mind with stress.

‘Dolls to control, come in,’ she says frantically, like she’s in some bizarre military operation. ‘Barbie car driving, I repeat, Barbie car

driving.'

And of course, I'm pretty mindful of the fact that nowadays

situations like this make me anxious and on edge, so I pull my act together admirably and respond to Sandra as follows: 'Wood here,

Sandra. What the hell are you talking about girl?'

'I think you'd better see for yourself, Mr Wood,' she says. And so, taking a breath first, I go along to do just that.

Now, the scene that greets me in the dolls' department is the one that makes me think I've finally lost it, and I understand it's one that made you think I was playing some sort of game. But, honestly, try to

imagine first of all the sight of around five of my staff, plus a number of well-meaning but less-than-helpful parents, running around like headless chickens trying to catch something that's clearly roaming quickly around the floor. I've got just enough time to say, 'Now look, can we just calm...' before I catch sight of what they're all chasing. I have to stare for a full minute or so before I can do anything else.

It's a Snowy Boots, crammed into a shocking pink Barbie

convertible, looking for all the world as if it were driving like a maniac.

I ought to add at this point that, of course, Snowy Boots isn't

designed to sit in cars, whether Barbie's or anyone else's. I don't think it's even supposed to bend its legs. So the sight of this one crouched uncomfortably in the driving seat, little fists grasping at the steering wheel, was a little on the disarming side to say the least. I don't have time to register just what else is wrong but later realise that it's the slight red tinge to the toy's pupils, which gives him an incongruous air of evil.

Then there's the killer phrase, from one of the parents. 'It's driving itself!' she yells.

'There must be something wrong with the motor,' says the hapless

Sandra, as she almost but not quite catches up with the car. I'm now convinced that our snowman friend has his welly-booted foot placed firmly on the accelerator. But here's the oddest part of the experience

(and I checked later with just about everyone else who was there, and I swear it's true): *no one else could see the snowman in the car.*

No one but me.

Other than, of course, my good friend Santa Claus. Because the old Victorian gent with the dislike of children we've inexplicably hired as Santa is standing just behind me at exactly that point, when the

snowman jumps – really, jumps! – out of the car and scurries off

behind one of the displays. As I stand and gape, Sandra finally catches up with the car and, to highly undeserved applause, maw it off.

'You can see it, can't you?' says the old man, clearly very amused.

'That's most unusual, young man. Most unusual.'

'What?' I say to him, trying not to panic. 'You mean you can…'

He brandishes some sort of electronic box, like a remote control, in front of my face. 'Well, my friends and I have had to tune in to it with this device,' he says, 'but you seem to have a natural ability.' He frowns. 'Possibly a high-level neurosis. I dare say that would do it.

Yes!' He laughs a pitched trill. 'Most unusual, indeed.'

And he potters away, his cane clacking on the floor, leaving me with my high-level neurosis to retreat once more to men's outfitting.

Of course, that wasn't the end of the story. Later that evening, after we'd shut up for the night, I found myself drawn back to the doll's department. I guess I wanted to see if' could rationalise what I'd seen.

There's this kid, gazing up at a display. How on earth had my guards missed him when they did the final sweep before closing up. I cough gently to get his attention.

'Excuse me, son…' My voice trails off as he turns around and I blush when I realise that it's a girl. I'm guessing late teens at the youngest and definitely on the boyish side. I splutter an apology but she doesn't seem to mind.

'I think it's up there, you know,' she simply says, 'but I can't reach it. And I'm not sure where my friends have gone. I shouldn't have gone

off on my own, really.'

'I'm sorry, but you're gonna have to leave the store,' I say.

'But my friends...' she starts to reply, but is cut short as three large boxes come crashing to the ground. I shoot a look up and just for a minute imagine I see an off-white figure in a Santa hat and

Wellingtons, slipping out of view. That's it, I think. I've finally cracked and decide that it's time to leave.

'Okay, it's time to be going now,' I begin, ushering the protesting girl out of the department, and back to the ground-floor entrance. The rational side of my mind is telling me that the boxes fell due to some sloppy work by spotty shelf-stackers while the crazy side is trying to convince me that it seemed to be the work of the rogue Snowy Boots –

the rogue Snowy Boots that now appeared to be a metre or so tall. As I slam the front door on the cold, lonely form of the girl, without even a

'Merry Christmas' to warm her, I tell myself that I need a drink.

Okay, looking back I can see how you might think I was making stuff up, or going crazy. Or maybe both. Seeing animated and apparently

invisible snowmen is not the action of a sane man. I'm afraid to say, however, that things don't get any saner from here.

I have two disastrous conversations over the next couple of days.

The first you know all too well and it has all the characteristics ofa train wreck. Let's just say that telling your girl about a malevolent snowman driving a car around your store is a sure way of convincing her that her hapless boyfriend has finally cracked up.

The second comes when, a few days later, as I tell my therapist

about the two-foot snowman marauding around the top shelf ofa toy department, I notice he's written the words 'psychotic episode' on his note pad.

So, by 28 December, abandoned by both my girlfriend and my

shrink, there I am walking down 42nd Street feeling more than a little sorry for myself. When I think it can't get worse I see our Santa Claus, his agent and that girl from the toy department standing in the middle

of the sidewalk, staring down an open manhole cover. I'm almost

happy to see them.

'It's Mr Wood, isn't it?' says the agent, who's swapped his out-of-fashion suit for an equally out-of-fashion polo-neck sweater.

'That's right,' I say.

'Not now, Steven. We've wasted enough time by now, haven't we?'

the old man's saying impatiently. Needless to say, he's now not

wearing the Santa outfit any more, so the Victorian gent look is

complete.

'But don't you remember telling us, Doctor. This man can see the

Snowman, can't he?'

'Oh, yes!' says the girl, wearing a skirt now, and looking pretty cute with it. 'He could help us find it.'

'All right, all right,' says the old man. He turns to me. 'So what do you say, Mr Wood, hmm? Would you like to help us seek out a

monster?'

'A monster?' I repeat. 'Where would we find a monster?'

'In the sewers, of course.'

He has such a glint in those bright watery eyes. I pause for a moment and consider my options. Do I want to follow up my so far highly

damaging delusions by going with three complete strangers into New York's sewer system or should I head for the bar and drown myself in a bottle of Jack? Hell, I think, I've come low enough already; I may as well go the extra few feet.

The old guy introduces his friends as Steven and Vicki, but calls himself nothing but 'Doctor'. I'm not convinced by the title at first, but find myself asking what the hell the snowman's all about.

'At first I suspect it was a perfectly normal child's plaything but, if 166

my hypothesis is correct, it's been affected by something far more sinister, something that we'll find –' he gestures dramatically with his cane into the darkness '– down there!'

And so, I find myself talked into descending into the sewers.

Thankfully, there's a wide enough space on either side of the tunnel for us to shuffle along, single file, without getting our ankles wet. Good job too. You see, I expected to see a stream of sludgy brown water running through the middle of a sewer. The meandering thread of green slime came as a shock. It ran through the tunnel as far as we could see, spreading thickly on the surface like some sort of Day-Glo oil slick.

'A-ha!' exclaims the Doctor. 'You see?' He pulls out a small vial from his jacket pocket, and takes a sample of the gunk. Steven and Vicki exchange mildly disgusted glances.

'What is it?' I ask.

'It is bacteria, young man. And of an origin which is most definitely extraterrestrial. I would expect it came here on a meteorite. What do you think of that, hmm?'

I say nothing. I mean, what was I supposed to say? Alien ooze

running through our sewers? I found the alligators hard enough to believe. Perhaps I was more rational than I thought.

Vicki it seemed had more questions.

'And this stuff animated the snowman?'

'Indeed. You remember Steven telling us about the poor child who

lost her toy when it fell down an open manhole cover? Well, when that snowman came in contact with the substance, there must have been a reaction, a freak effect of two chemical compositions coming together that had no business even being on the same planet It's unfortunate really, as if the bacteria had remained down here by itself I think it would have faded harmlessly within a few days, diluted by the raw sewage.'

The three of them look at me when I get the giggles, the sound of my hysteria bouncing off the sewer walls. That's probably what alerts our target to our presence. There he is, man-sized now, splashing away

from us in his black boots, tinsel scarf trailing behind him in the breeze. We try to catch up with him, but, boy, the guy's fast for a snowman. The Doctor sighs wearily that he'll have to think of

something else, and mutters darkly that we've only got about three days to go before the creature enters its 'adult, malignant phase'.

Before I really know what's happened, we're back on the sidewalk and he and his friends are thanking me profusely for my help. I'm still giggling as I walk back to my apartment, feeling surreally buoyed up by the experience.

* * *

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Surprisingly, my good mood almost sustains me to the New Year. I

manage to leave a message on your answerphone to explain about the mutating ooze in the sewer, although frustratingly you don't reply.

Which is fair enough, I suppose.

I don't tell anyone else, just go back to work and hope no one can smell the booze on my breath. Somehow I manage to hold it together, and throw myself into the New Year's Eve parade. There l am striding along with the rest of the staff, grinning away while gigantic balloon animals are trailed along with us to promote the store. Despite myself, I'm even quite enjoying it.

And then, of course, I see the snowman. It's about twenty metres tall now, and it's beyond belief that no one else but me can see it, although of course it's less incongruous than it would otherwise be amongst the gigantic cartoon animals currently floating in the air.

What's even more alarming though is that it looks really mean. Its eyes are now completely red, its fixed smile is twisted and somewhat seething, and I remember what the Doctor said about a 'malignant

adult phase'. So far, it's been stomping along the middle of the parade but I shudder to think what would happen if it lost its step by accident, or decided to start hurting people on purpose. What if I wonder, it gets mad that it's an anthropomorphised alien organism, which due to its appearance as a twenty-foot badly drawn snowman is being made to

look a bit of an idiot.

I begin to panic. There's something very dangerous and very

alarming here and no one but me to notice or deal with it, which is troubling to say the least. What I really need is a...

'Doctor!'

I spin around to see Vicki, looking just adorable in a winter woolly and a bobble hat, shaking the Doctor's arm to get his attention. I rush over to join them at the fringes of the parade, where they're awkwardly tagging along at a little distance from the main crowd and notice that Taylor's wheeling something along that looks a little bit like a popcorn machine stuffed with foam.

'Hello again, fellas,' I find myself saying. 'You're seeing what I'm seeing, yeah?'

Steven nods. 'You can help us out. The Doctor's developed a

formula that will reverse the effect of the bacteria, but we need to administer it straight away.'

'It should work instantly,' the Doctor says with apparent glee.

'And we administer it... how?' I ask.

Vicki opens the lid of the machine and reaches a hand inside,

bringing it out again with a large rolled lump of milky-white gel in her palm. 'Snowballs!' she says.

The Doctor tuts and frowns. 'Really, child!'

Steven grins. 'But pretty much,' he says. 'Come on, Mr Wood.

How's your throwing arm?'

And so I shrug, reach in for a scoop of the cold, gelatinous

substance, and on cue lob it straight at the gigantic snowman. I whoop as I score a direct hit right in the small of the back. At first it doesn't notice but, as Steven and Vicki join the assault, the Snowy Boots turns to face us, roaring in pain. I should be scared, but I think something

must have snapped by now so I just scoop up the gunk and chuck it at the monster. The crowd look on amused, but a few of them obviously think it's part of the parade and take it as the cue to start gathering up snow from the sidewalk and lobbing it at the balloons. It's mayhem and everyone seems to have tremendous fun, except for the snowman, who's steaming and fizzing and collapsing in on itself. As I hit the thing right between the cartoon eyes, the entire creature lets out a final screech and explodes into tiny flakes that rain down on top of us all.

But I don't have time to cheer as a snowball smacks into the back of my neck and I spot the Doctor winking mischievously out of the corner of my eye.

I lose Steven, Vicki and the Doctor in the crowd. The parade has

descended into merry hell, but everyone seems to be enjoying

themselves. I wander about for a bit before allowing myself to get wrapped up in the street party that has started to ring in the New Year.

But I'm in no mood to sing *Auld Lang Syne* with strangers and so head home, my mind still spinning with everything that's happened. I'm walking through Central Park, when I see my three friends again,

standing outside that very some blue phone box that had been in the toy department a week before. I can only assume it was forcibly

removed when someone realised it wasn't an authorised part of the display.

I start to walk over to them, when something stops me. There's only so much weirdness a guy can take in seven days and continue on my way. When I look back, the box has gone.

So here I am, wondering what to do with myself after all that. Part of me just wants to weep about the things I've seen over the last few days.

I started writing this letter because I thought I had to get it straight in my head and maybe to try to persuade you that your boyfriend wasn't mad, and that all of this was real. But you know what, now that I've finished, I don't feel I have to persuade you of anything. I don't think it's important that I helped knock a slime-mutated alien snowman

down to earth with a few well-aimed volleys. I think the important

thing was letting you know that I'd actually enjoyed a New Year

celebration for the first time in years.

I'm not sure if what I think happened actually happened at all now, in the cold light of day, but either way, the world suddenly seems a bigger and more exciting place. Perhaps you heard that in my voice just then, when I phoned you and asked if you'd like to meet for a New Year coffee.

Thinking about it, I don't think there's any need to give you this letter at all, and though I certainly needed to write it, perhaps the best thing to do is just chuck it in the trash on the way out.

And so, are we ready? I think we are. Diane, I'll see you in about twenty minutes. Doctor, Vicki, Steven, thank you. And, I guess, Happy New Year.

Love, Alan

The Crackers

Richard Salter

An Adventure of the Sixth Doctor, with Evelyn

I run down the stairs so fast I nearly trip and tumble. My little brother screeches in delight as I nearly end up head first at the bottom of the staircase. I recover and beat Tommy into the living room, grabbing my stocking from its usual place hanging off the mantel.

I sit cross-legged in front of the fireplace and try to determine what's inside the fishnet stocking by feeling and peering through the little holes. Tommy is already reaching inside to pull out the first surprise, enjoying the sound of the crêpe-paper trim rustling. I reach in and the very first present gets caught in the netting. Stocking time is always an exercise in frustration; it's so hard to get the presents out!

Eventually, the stocking is empty and the contents lie strewn about the carpet. There are sweets and a little spinning top, a small doll and the usual tangerine that takes up space in the toes of the stocking.

Tommy is playing with the little cars that were in his stocking when Mummy comes down and wishes us a happy Christmas. She makes us

eggs on toast for breakfast and then sets about preparing Christmas dinner. We rarely have chicken so this is a real treat. Once the bird is safely in the oven, Mummy starts on the scrumptious bread sauce. I help her chop up the onions and then in goes the milk and the pieces of bread, all mixed together. Soon after, Tommy is disappointed to see Mummy is washing a bowl of Brussels sprouts. He can't stand them!

It's not long before Daddy joins us downstairs. Mummy pauses her

lunch preparations and brings him breakfast, which he tucks into

enthusiastically while poring over the Christmas *Radio Times*. We don't have a television yet, so Daddy is just reading the radio listings.

He circles a few programmes, the Queen's speech being one of them.

He notices me hovering behind him.

'Why don't you and your brother finish putting the decorations on the tree?'

I glance over to the corner of the living room. Funny, I could have 171

sworn we had already festooned the tree with all the decorations we possessed, but now it seems somewhat bare. The lights are still on and shining brightly. Tommy fetches the box and sure enough it's nearly full. Perhaps Daddy took down the decorations last night while we were in bed, just to give us something to keep us occupied today. I try to remember when we actually decorated the first time, or even when the tree was brought into the house, but those memories are fuzzy and feel strangely distant.

Tommy is already hanging the handmade baubles and trinkets from

the lower branches of the tree – he can't reach much higher! As I help him hang a particularly stubborn item, the branches shake and a shower of pine needles joins the mess already on the carpet around the huge pot, covered in red crepe paper. Tommy hands me a long strip of tinsel with disappointment on his face. As usual, the metal tinsel has gone rusty during the past year of storage.

'We'll just have to make do,' I tell my brother. 'With the barriers up we can't go and buy new tinsel.'

‘Shops wouldn’t be open on Christmas Day anyway,’ Daddy says.

I turn the worst-affected side of the tinsel towards the tree as I entwine it around the branches. ‘See, Tommy? It doesn’t look so bad.’

And just as I say that, the fairy lights go out.

Daddy sighs theatrically and stomps over to the tree. This happens every year. If one bulb burns out, none of the lights work. So Daddy has to replace each one in turn to find out which one is causing the problem. One day somebody will invent fairy lights that will stay on even if one of the bulbs burns out.

For now our attempts to decorate the tree are on hold, so I go to see if I can help Mummy with lunch. She tells me to set the table and not to forget the crackers. These are Tom Smith crackers, the finest

available and the source of great anticipation in our household. I know that Daddy makes a good wage at his job but that doesn’t mean he is overly extravagant in the things he buys. However, he always says, since our family name is Cracker, it’s only fitting that we have the best crackers money can buy.

I nearly drop the box I am carrying when I bump into the man

suddenly standing in our living room.

‘What are you doing in here?’ he booms. I drop the box of crackers.

The man is tall and imposing, with a mop of blond hair and the most extraordinary clothing. He wears a clash of colours, a patchwork of bad taste. It hurts the eyes to look at him, so instead I concentrate on the chain hanging from his waistcoat pocket. There is a woman with him, older and kindly looking. She reminds me of my grandma. Her mouth 172

is hanging open in astonishment.

Mummy comes in from the kitchen, her hands covered by oven

gloves. Daddy puts down the string of lights and confronts the stranger.

‘Who are you and what are you doing in my house?’ he demands to

know.

The stranger glances at his companion and says, ‘I’m the Doctor,

and this is my friend, Evelyn. I hate to contradict you but I’m afraid this isn’t your house.’

‘Not my house? How dare you, sir! How did you get in here? And

why were you even allowed to be outside?’

The Doctor raises an eyebrow. ‘Why wouldn’t I be allowed

outside?’

‘Because of the curfew.’

‘Curfew?’ he repeats. ‘What curfew?’

‘Don’t you listen to the radio?’ Daddy asks.

During this exchange, the lady called Evelyn has stood silently, her mouth agape. Now she is pulling on the Doctor’s arm, eager to tell him something.

‘You’re not allowed to go outside?’ the Doctor asks. Before Daddy can answer, the Doctor snaps at his companion: ‘Yes, Evelyn, what is it?’

‘Doctor, it’s uncanny.’

‘What is?’

‘This room, this house. It’s my house!’

‘This is our house,’ I pipe up.

‘Quiet, Alice,’ Daddy warns me.

‘Evelyn, what are you talking about?’

The kindly lady staggers a little bit and the Doctor catches her.

Despite his anger, Daddy grabs a chair and helps her to sit down. She takes a deep breath and eventually recovers enough to speak again.

‘This is the house I grew up in. I remember it vividly, Doctor. I spent many happy years in that house and now I’m back. It’s the 1950s

again! Everything looks exactly the same. Even the smell is familiar!’

‘What smell?’ Mummy wants to know. ‘My house does not smell!’

‘Oh, Doctor, how is this possible? How can my childhood home

exist here, today, inside the TARDIS?’

The Doctor seems to ponder this question for a moment. Then he

asks, ‘Are these people your family?’

Evelyn shakes her head. ‘No.’

‘Do you know them?’

‘I’ve never met them before in my life. Do you think they came

through the gap?’

The Doctor puts his hands in his pockets and stares down his nose at her. ‘I rather think they’d be dead if they’d come in that way,’ he says
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condescendingly. He turns to me, his piercing eyes trying to read my thoughts – at least that’s how it feels. ‘And who might you be?’ he asked.

Daddy answers. ‘We, sir, are the Cracker family. I’m George

Cracker, this is my wife Helena, and my children are Alice and

Thomas. Now I’m going to ask you one more time before I call the

police. What are you doing in my house?’

‘And how did you get past the barriers?’ I added.

‘What barriers?’ Evelyn asks.

‘You know,’ I reply. The barriers they put up to protect us from the unexploded bomb. We can’t leave the house until they defuse it.’

‘It’s a leftover from the War,’ Daddy explains.

The Doctor considers this for a moment and then snaps into action.

He takes my hand and leads me to the front door. Daddy tries to stop him but his bulk is deceptive and he’s too quick. Before I know it I am outside the house. Except that we’re not outdoors.

We're in a brightly lit, white corridor. The walls are lined with a regular pattern of indented circles. I can feel tears rising as I start to panic. I want to go back to my family, but my curiosity is keeping me from saying anything to the blond man in the patchwork coat. He leads me along the corridor until we come to a huge, jagged hole in one wall.

Through the hole I can see a whirling dervish of blue and black light. It is swirling around, like staring at my spinning top only so much larger.

The edges of the walls flap about in a strong wind that threatens to suck us through the opening. I'd be pulled through if the Doctor didn't have a firm hand on my shoulder.

Memories come flooding back. Memories of seeing my very first

police box at the side of the road where we had broken down. I

remember Daddy being confused, saying police boxes hadn't been

used for years. He tried to use the phone but it wasn't connected up yet, so he pushed open the door and went inside. When he didn't come out, Mummy, Tommy and I followed him in. We found him inside, beyond

the impossible room with the mushroom in the middle. Before we

knew it, we were lost.

Memories of wandering with my family for days. No food, no water, no way out. I remember my daddy finding an axe in one room and

deciding he would try to break out of this prison. I think he had gone a little bit crazy by then; Tommy's constant crying and whining didn't help. Daddy started screaming as he plunged the axe over and over into the wall, trying to smash his way through. All he did was open a hole into hell. There were sparks, then extraordinary lights before the feeling that my insides were now outside.

The next thing I remember is waking up on Christmas morning and

rushing downstairs to open my stocking. But the weird thing is, these aren't my stairs, and this isn't my house. I can't hold back the tears

now. I feel like a hamster in a cage, running around on my wheel with no way to escape.

The Doctor crouches down until his face is mere inches from mine.

‘Tell me everything,’ he says.

When we return to the house, the horrible memories are still foremost in my mind until… until… that smell… Is that the Christmas pudding?

Of course it is.

Aunty Evelyn is bringing in a large plate upon which stands a

Christmas pudding, flames licking at the stodgy mix as the alcohol burns. I love Aunty Evelyn’s Christmas pudding!

As Mummy brings in a jug of steaming custard and plates of mince

pies, I rush to the table, sitting down and waiting to be served. I have to cram the spoon in my mouth to stop myself screaming out to be served first. I hope I get the lucky sixpence this year! Of course, if I do get the sixpence it will be the silver one and I can’t spend it. They make them out of nickel now, and Aunty Evelyn says it’s not safe to put the new sixpences in the pudding. So every year she puts her specially saved silver sixpence in the pudding for one of us to discover, and then swaps it for a nickel sixpence we can spend, putting the silver one away for next year.

Aunty Evelyn serves me first, a big slab of pudding with a mince pie and warm custard. I stare at it, almost drooling in anticipation. I can’t start until everyone is served and seated though, that would be rude.

‘Ahem!’

The sound comes from the front door. We all stop what we’re doing and turn around. There is a man there, wearing the most outlandish outfit. All different colours and patterns, garishly thrown together to make him look like a tube of Smarties. He seems familiar but I can’t place him.

Daddy rises to his feet. ‘What are you doing in my house?’ he

booms.

The stranger rolls his eyes irritably. ‘Not this again.’

‘I asked you,’ says Daddy, ‘what you’re doing in my house!’

‘More to the point,’ replies the man, ‘what is Evelyn doing with that jug of custard?’

Daddy turns to Aunty Evelyn. ‘You know this man?’

Aunty Evelyn seems undecided. ‘He looks familiar,’ she admits.

‘Evelyn, it’s me! The Doctor! You must listen to me. This family

doesn’t belong here. They’re not your family. This is not your house!’

Daddy storms over to the stranger and attempts to eject him from the 175

house. ‘Get out!’ he is saying. But the Doctor doesn’t give up.

‘The TARDIS constructed this house from your memory in order to

keep the family occupied. They wandered inside and became so lost and distressed they started causing damage. Get your hands off me, sir!’

‘Not until you vacate my property.’

‘Evelyn, listen to me! Do you remember the breach in the hull of the TARDIS? George took an axe to one of the old girl’s walls and got lucky, or unlucky as the case may be. The resulting explosion of raw artron energy blew a rift in her structure, a rift that has been gradually growing day by day. The TARDIS is so busy with maintaining this

illusion I don’t think she’s realised how big the breach has become.

There’s no unexploded bomb, it’s just a good way to keep the family from leaving their house. Evelyn!’

‘George, shall I call the police?’ Aunty Evelyn suggests.

‘Good idea,’ Daddy replies. ‘Unless this so-called Doctor intends to leave immediately.’

The Doctor detaches himself from Daddy’s grip and adjusts his

patchwork coat. ‘Very well, but mark my words; this so-called Doctor will be back. Something’s trying to get into my TARDIS through the

gap. Something from the vortex. Something hungry!'

And with that, Daddy finally manages to eject the strange man and slams the door behind him.

After lunch we are all very full, so we head for the living room to sit down and listen to the Queen's speech. It's then that I notice something outside the window.

The windows don't let much light in since the barriers went up to protect us from the bomb. But even so, I clearly see something move just behind the glass. It was so fast I couldn't make out its shape. It makes the hairs on my neck stand on end. Suddenly I'm filled with worry. I ask if anybody saw the shape but nobody did.

Seconds later, I see it again. This time Mummy sees it too. Before long, we're all staring at the windows, watching the fast-moving things flit by. Without realising it we are gathered close together now. It's not people we are seeing rush by, it's something else. None of us wants to go outside to investigate.

There is a cough from the door. The Doctor is back. This time,

nobody objects.

'You all need to come with me, right now,' he tells us urgently.

We don't move. We are all too scared. The things outside the

windows are now bashing against them as they pass, like moths against the panes, drawn toward the lights inside. Harder and harder come the 176

bangs. It is only a matter of time before the glass breaks and they get in.

Daddy is trying to call the police. Mummy has Tommy and me

wrapped in her arms beside the Christmas tree. Aunty Evelyn has

armed herself with a poker from the fireplace. The Doctor is trying to get everybody out of the door but we're still ignoring him. In the end he whispers urgently to me.

'Alice! Do you remember our conversation in the corridor outside?'

I stare blankly at him. I don't know what he's talking about.

‘Come on, Alice! Remember? The bright white corridor with the

roundels? We talked about your daddy and his axe, and about what you want from Santa this year. Hmm? You said you wanted a… Rosebud

doll?’

‘I do!’ I cry. How could he know that, unless… ‘I remember you.’

‘Good, well done, Alice!’

‘Just ignore him, dear,’ Mummy says distractedly, her eyes never

leaving the windows.

‘What are those things?’ I ask the Doctor, pointing to the monsters smashing themselves against the glass.

‘They’re called Vortisaurs, creatures that exist within the time

vortex,’ the Doctor replies, nonsensically. ‘They’re trying to find the gap in the TARDIS’s infrastructure so they can get in and start

devouring her. She must be using an enormous amount of power to

keep this illusion going for your family, I know because tracing the excessive power expenditure was how I found you in the first place.

That energy usage must be confusing the creatures. If the TARDIS

stops the illusion, the Vortisaurs will find the breach. If she tries to seal the breach, she cannot maintain this illusion. Plus she’s probably concerned that your father might find himself another axe. She could seal the whole section and do an emergency jettison, but not while we’re here of course.’

‘I don’t understand much of that, Doctor, but I think you’re saying it’s time for us to leave.’

‘You’re a very smart girl, young Alice.’

‘How do I know you’re telling the truth? It all sounds very far-

fetched to

‘Think back, Alice. When was the last time you celebrated

Christmas?' I think about it. I try to shut out the terrible noise from seemingly thousands of creatures outside the window. So if it's

Christmas today, we must have celebrated last Christmas one year ago.

Yet it feels so much more recent than that. It seems like it was just yesterday.

'Every day is Christmas Day,' I say at last. That can't be right.

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Perhaps the Doctor is sincere. He certainly seems to be. How long have we been trapped here, I wonder, doomed to celebrate Christmas every day for the rest of our lives? There are worse fates, I suppose.

I try to convince my daddy to leave, but he is having none of it.

Mummy is too busy consoling poor Tommy to notice my urgent

requests for us to leave the house. Aunty Evelyn, meanwhile, is

patrolling the windows, ready to attack anything that breaks through. I hurry over to the Doctor to tell him the plan that's just popped into my head.

Ten minutes later and the creatures show no sign of giving up. The Doctor has not yet returned – I hope he hurries back soon.

And suddenly there he is. He's attracting everyone's attention now.

His Santa suit is a bit tatty but has the required effect.

'Ho, ho, ho!' says the Doctor, clearly very uncomfortable behind his fluffy white beard and red hood.

Tommy hears the magic words and immediately jumps up out of

Mummy's arms. She tries to stop him but is too late. 'Santa!' he cries, running to the Doctor.

As planned, the Doctor scoops up Tommy and leaves by the front

door. Mummy screams! 'My baby! Bring him back!' she cries and

takes off after him. Daddy and Aunty Evelyn aren't far behind, and

nor am I.

Outside in the corridor, my family is blinking furiously under the bright lights. Their memories are returning, I can see it in their eyes.

‘Tommy!’ I yell, hurrying off in the direction the Doctor is headed.

‘Quickly, Santa is taking him away!’

My family rush to follow me, driven to rescue poor Tommy before

Santa can escape. Evelyn – I know now that she is not my aunty – has cottoned on to the charade and is encouraging Mummy and Daddy to

follow the Doctor as he races through the endless, twisting maze of corridors. He is being careful not to get too far ahead, and whenever we lose sight of his bright red outfit we can still hear Tommy’s crying to keep us on track. At long last we catch up with the Doctor. He is standing before the large mushroom-like contraption in the centre of this room. Smoke is pouring from the machine’s dazzling array of

buttons, lights, levers and dials. Tommy is scooped up by Mummy and is fine. My Daddy moves to attack the Doctor, but Evelyn steps in and tries to calm him down, assuring him that the Doctor has just saved their lives.

‘Stand by for emergency jettison,’ the Doctor calls. I’m not sure what I should do, so I take Evelyn’s hand and she smiles kindly at me.

‘The Doctor knows what he’s doing,’ she assures me. ‘He’s going to
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get rid of your fake house and those horrible creatures, and seal the breach before they can get in.’

She has such a lovely smile. I can’t help but trust her. Daddy looks really angry, like the time I broke the vase containing his prize begonias. Mummy is just relieved to have Tommy back in her arms.

There is a horrible noise like grinding gears. The room tilts, pitching us all to the floor. I hurt my wrist trying to break my fall but Evelyn grabs my other hand and keeps me from bashing my head.

A moment later, the sickening lurching comes to an end. Everything is quiet again, save for a continuous humming sound that doesn’t seem dangerous. I breathe a sigh of relief.

‘It’s done,’ the Doctor says, pressing a button on the mushroom with relish. ‘The house is gone and the corridor that led to it is completely sealed. No Vortisaur will feast on my ship today!’ He smiles at me and starts examining my sprained wrist. It has been hurting, but somehow in his hands I don’t feel the pain at all. ‘Your idea to get your family out worked brilliantly. You’re a very special young lady.’ He takes out a first aid kit and begins bandaging my wrist.

Mummy and Daddy, meanwhile, aren’t quite sure what to make of

these proceedings. Daddy is still talking about calling the police, while Mummy just wants to go home.

Ah, yes,’ cries the Doctor. ‘That I can help you with.’

Being home again – our real home in London – certainly brings back memories. Ifs not 1957; it’s 2007. We’re not the Crackers. That was just a name the Doctor’s amazing ship gave us after it plucked it from Evelyn’s mind. We are actually the Kemps. The Doctor says it was all part of the illusion to keep my family occupied so we wouldn’t cause any more damage. Meanwhile, as we celebrated Christmas Day over

and over again – another memory supplied by Evelyn – the hole Daddy made in the wall with his axe got bigger and bigger, until it attracted unwanted attention. I shudder as I recall the horrible creatures at the window.

I ask why the ship didn’t just provide us with signposts, or a map to get out. The Doctor agrees, that would have made more sense. He

explains that the TARDIS does not think like me or him. She is alive in a manner of speaking but acts more like a machine than a person.

Sometimes she tends to react to immediate threats and that can

occasionally get her stuck in an infinite loop. I’m not really sure what an infinite loop is, but it sounds like something that might take a *very* long time to get out of.

It really is Christmas Day but my family and I are not really in the mood to celebrate it all over again. Still, we listen to the Queen’s 179

speech and Mum rustles up some dinner to serve to our guests. The Doctor seems in a rush to leave, but Evelyn convinces him to stay and eat. I’m glad; they are both fun. The Doctor’s stories are incredible tales, and I wonder how many of them are true despite how

impossible they sound. Almost as impossible as the Doctor asking for a third helping of Christmas pudding.

Eventually it is time for them to go. The Doctor and Evelyn say their goodbyes and step into the blue police box, the same one that Daddy entered at the side of the road and into which we followed him. A moment later, the Doctor reappears. He hands me something in a box.

It's a doll!

'A Rosebud doll,' he says. 'I checked with Santa, and you've been very good this year.'

I smile and give him a big hug, and then his amazing blue box fades away. I stare in awe at this astonishing trick, for it must surely be another illusion. After a while I turn my attention to the doll. I can remember wanting this so badly, and now she seems old-fashioned. I wonder if there's any way I can exchange her for a Wii...

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Jigsaw

Michael Abberton

An Adventure of the Third Doctor, with Jo

UNIT Field Report X45637828/2006

CLASSIFIED SECRET – EYES ONLY

Unexplained incident on London Underground, Northern Line

Approx 16:20, 03112/06

Officers Present: Col. E. Chaudhry, Sgt. W. Hoffman

Witness Interview transcript extracts

Witness 1

I was on the Tube with my mates, Jizz, Gazza and Paul. We'd been out since noon and were pretty knackered by then. Jizz had nicked this Santa hat with plastic mistletoe hanging over the front and was using it to snog and feel up every bit of talent he passed. Gazza had one of them stupid hats with blinky lights in it. I hadn't bothered but this bird had snugged me in the last pub and had put some tinsel round me

neck.

It was like a trophy.

The Tube was pretty busy but not too bad. Problem in winter is

always the same though – freezing outside and hot as hell down there.

It had the regular mix of people, y'know, tourists, asylum seekers, families and some more groups out on the town.

It was rocking and bumping something brutal and Paul had gone

quiet and a bit green round the gills, like he was gonna puke. This Chinese girl opposite was looking well worried in case he chucked on her white Nikes.

This couple got on – at Waterloo, I think – like they must've been going to a seventies fancy dress party. He was a real museum piece, with a white Elvis quiff and a fluffy shirt, a kid's toy ray gun clutched in his hand. God knows what the girl was doing with him. She was

pretty fit – long blonde hair, miniskirt, kinky platform boots and a short Afghan coat. Old enough to be her granddad – lucky geezer. Both of them were really wigged about something. The old guy started

pointing the ray gun at people. Jizz asked the bird for a Christmas kiss but she just looked down her nose at him. I thought Paul was definitely gonna chuck because he was looking worse. Before the old guy got to him, he just stood up and started shaking. The girl pointed, and the bloke turned his toy towards him. I saw red. My mate was feeling

rough and this bloke was just taking the mick, so I got up to give him a piece of my mind. Seconds later I was sat down again. One look from the old geezer and my bottle went. If I hadn't had that last shooter in the Dog I would have had him no probs. As I said, lucky. Nobody

messes with me and mine!

Then Paul starts talking really weird, like in Ukrainian or something, and the bloke chats right back at him in the same language. Before I knew what was happening, the lights in the carriage started flashing

on and off like a cheap club, and Paul and the bloke were pushing

themselves back and forth. I couldn't make out what happened next because someone stood on my foot. One minute Paul was shoved

against the door between the carriages and the next he was gone. He hadn't got off, hadn't fallen through to the next carriage, he'd just vanished. Before we knew it the lights stopped strobing and we were off again like normal.

I didn't know what to think. I looked to my mates but Gazza had

fallen asleep, his head lolling forward. Jizz looked as confused as me.

The old guy and his bird just looked like they'd expected Paul to disappear. Jizz tried to give him a call but couldn't find his number on his mobile. So I tried mine but couldn't see Paul's number on the contact list. It was weird. I was sure I had him on my phone.

I kicked Gazza, waking him up and asked him if he could phone

Paul. The prat just looked at us as if we were mad.

'Paul? Who the hell is Paul?'

'What you talking about?' I said. 'You know Paul.'

'I told you,' he says, 'I don't know no Paul.'

So I go, you know, Paul from the... he works with... lives in...

Gazza was right. Paul who? I couldn't remember a thing about him.

Nothing.

Well, I can tell you this for nothing: I'm not gonna forget Paul. We were on that Tube cos of Paul. Paul wanted to go to the World's End for Christmas Eve. Paul was meeting some bird there. Paul had bribed us with the extra round of stammers to make sure we gave in and

dragged ourselves over London. Paul. All because of Paul. But that old bloke and the girl stopped us.

And them two – I don't know where they went. They must've got off at Leicester Square. But there was something funny about them. Don't worry, I'd definitely remember them if I clapped eyes on them again.

Witness 2

It was my first Christmas in England. I was very excited, because in Japan we do not celebrate it. Happy New Year is a big festival, but the children do not get presents, they get *otoshidama* – money gift – from family in a special card.

I was going to visit my friends, Yuko and Charley, in Camden. They were having a party and I was looking forward to it. Yuko came from Japan three years before, and her English is very good. Charley is her flatmate. They have the shop in the Camden Market and they sell a nice accessory. I had some presents for them in a carry bag.

Usually I sleep on the train or on a bus, but not on a Tube. It is not safe like in Japan and there are many strange people in London. It is not as busy like Tokyo, but I come from the country, from Shizuoka, I don't like the city too much. Yuka calls me *inaka-mon*, 'country bumpkin', but I am not really.

There was a nice family next to me, with a cute little girl with long blonde hair. She smiled at me and so did her mommy. Her daddy

looked nice too. The girl was between and looked very excited, holding hands all together. I felt a little homesick maybe.

Then the nasty men got on and sat down across from us. They

looked really drunk and smelled of cheap scent and beer. They were using very bad words and were laughing loud. The little girl's daddy looked angry but didn't say anything. The worst one was small and thin and had red hair. He had some Christmas tree decoration around his neck. He kept looking at me too and I didn't like it.

One of them was very strange. He was a black man with very short

hair wearing a green jacket. He was looking at nothing and sweating very much. His mouth was moving like talking, but I couldn't hear his talk.

Then the old man and the girl got on the train. They were both very fashionable. She was dressed like a *harajuku* girl, but her make-up was not too much. She was very cute. The man had a science tool and was using it. They both seemed very intense – high tension. He pointed the machine at me and I was a little frightened, but the girl smiled and

spoke to me in perfect Japanese. I was surprised. She called him *sensei* so he must be a teacher or a doctor or something. He could speak

Japanese too.

Then the black man stood up. He was shaking, almost like dancing.

His face was wet very much, and his eyes stood out. I could not

understand what he was saying. The Sensei pointed the machine to him and he got a result. He talked together with the black man in a

language I did not know, and then suddenly the electric went off. There 183

were flashes of light, but I hid my eyes. It was very scary. There are terrorists in England and my teacher in Japan told me about bombs in London. I thought maybe the black man was a terrorist.

Then there was a big light. The lady next to me was scared too and she screamed in a big voice. I thought that maybe we would die. But then I looked up and everything was normal. The train was moving –

the electric was on. The Sensei and the nice girl looked upset, but calm.

The black man had gone, I do not know where. People looked at the Sensei and the girl, and he looked around and smiled, and I felt

suddenly, peace, everything was okay. She put her arm around him and he smiled at her, and they got off at the next stop.

It was very strange. I think the Sensei was looking for the black man, maybe to help him. But he was there to help us too. He took away the scary-ness, and made everything okay.

Witness 3

I had been round to my mate's house to watch a couple of DVDs. We even got the old *Die Hard* out for a go – well, it is a Christmas movie, yeah? We had a couple of Skols and some crisps, and then I had to go back home to dog-sit while my folks went to church for midnight mass.

Bob's dad's got a nice new plasma screen and plays DVDs through one of them home-cinema set-ups. Bit better than my old Xbox. I'm going to get one of them when I'm rich and famous.

I was listening to some vibes on my iPod on the Tube. I usually do –

but you have to crank it up until your ears are bleeding to cover the noise of the train and the buskers. God, they really get on my wick.

When I'm going to college, I see the same ones every day playing the same REM and Simon and Garfunkel and it drives you honkers. The

tourists just see it once; it's different if you live there, I can tell you.

Don't give them any money, yeah?

Oh, yeah, sorry. Right, so there's me, sitting on the Tube minding my own beeswax, listening to some Pearl Jam. Across from me is this Japanese girl: very cute, big trainers, stripy tights, mini Hello Kitty backpack, you know the type. Next to her is this nuclear family, pretty mom, cute kid, square-cut Oxford-shoe dad, you know, semi-detached, Chelsea tractor and Audi in the drive, one dog, two cats and a hamster, yeah?

There were some Spanish tourists next to me but they got off and

these ASBO-dodgers got on, proper chav lads out on the lash, yeah?

What a set of prats. I could hear them over Eddie Vedder, they were that loud, the only adjectives being four letters long, yeah? You get the picture. 'Come to England and experience the culture?' Well, there it 184

was. I was sat next to the shortest one, the runt of the pack, a ginger-nut wearing a white anorak, big gold earring, tinsel round his neck that was irritating the nasty acne above the collar of his shirt. On the far end by the door was a guy in a green jacket – like a US Army combat

jacket, you know? He just didn't seem to fit in with them, yeah?

Dressed totally differently. Not really joining in. But, boy, did he look the worst for wear. Utterly wasted.

After a bit the old guy and the young girl got on. He was wearing proper disco kit, a bit like Prince in the *Purple Rain* days. Yeah –

purple – and she could have walked off the set of *Life on Mars*. Very pretty, big eyes. The guy was holding something and checking it all the time, like some kind of big PDA or one of those fancy new phones.

He was looking for someone, as it turned out. The chavs started making comments and gestures, one of them went to get up but the old guy stared him down, like Lee Van Cleef in a spaghetti western, proper gunslinger eyes.

The guy in the green jacket stood up, and I thought something was going to kick off. Then my iPod crashed and the lights went out. There were flashes of light, like a strobe, and I could see the old man and the big black guy toe-to-toe. I thought the old man was going to get

creamed but he knew all the moves. He must be a black belt or

something. Each move was highlighted by a flash, freezing the action.

The soldier swung a right cross; the codger swept that aside with his left and chopped at the big man's square neck. He took the blow easily, like he didn't even feel it, and went to push the old man back. He sidestepped and bent at the knees; absorbing the push and holding firm, and then made a feint with his left and threw a straight-arm karate punch into the soldier's nose. He staggered back, he felt that one. The old master took one step forward and resumed a weird martial art

stance.

The soldier shook his head and came again, trying to grab the lapels of the old man's velvet jacket. But the master was not going to let anyone crease his threads. He brought both arms up between the guy's, pushing them open, and then in one move, brought both hands, palm flat, into the soldier's chest and pushed back with enough force to send him flying back into the connecting door.

There was a little more space here, and maybe the old guy would be doing some round house kicks or giving the soldier some serious

Chuck Norris action, but the soldier stood up, his arms out to the side like a crucifix, then he threw his head back and there was a blinding flash. I was looking right at him and was dazzled – I had this dark blue afterimage of the guy burned on to my retinas for minutes afterwards.

But I could see that he had gone; he just wasn't there, like the flash had 185

taken him out, yeah?

My iPod came back on and the lights too. Motörhead was melting

my brain so I switched it off. The old man looked sad, I don't think he had wanted to take the guy out, but he had, somehow. The girl said something weird to him about 'staying in this time for Christmas', but he just said that he wanted to go home, so they got off at the next stop.

It was certainly a good show, better than staying in to watch

Christmas Morecambe and Wise re-runs or Timothy Dalton Bond

movies on Sky. Real bit of action on the Tube!

Witness 4

I wanted to go to the panto since my friend, Aisha, had been last week and she said it was really good. At first, I didn't fancy it but she said it was really funny and exciting, and not old-fashioned at all. One of the actors from *Neighbours* was in it, and a couple of film stars, whose names I can't recall. It was really good, and I had a great time, most of all because Ben was at home with Nana, and for the first time in three years and eight months I had Mama and Papa to myself, just like it was before Ben was born. I was so happy to be with them again without Ben constantly trying to get Mama's attention or throwing a fit if Papa picked me up or hugged me. I hate him. Well, not really, he is very cute sometimes and he can't say 'Veronica' so he calls me 'Nicknick'.

It was also the last day of Hanukkah, so before we left the house we had lit the candles and sung the prayers. I like Hanukkah. Mostly holidays are very boring and there are loads of things you can't do, but Hanukkah is great because it is really just like Christmas and I don't feel left out when all my friends get presents. Sometimes it comes before Christmas and I get presents early! And Mama is a great cook and the food is brilliant, though I like going shopping with Mama the best. Ben can't come because he is too young– YES! I have to study more now to prepare for my bat mitzvah next year, but I like languages and I like singing. Nana sometimes cries when I sing the prayers, and she puts both her hot dry hands on my cheeks and kisses me. I don't like that bit.

Papa said we must dress for the theatre, so he put on a shirt and tie and his new jacket that Mama liked, and I wore my new party dress. I felt a little bit silly riding on the Tube with this big pink fluffy skirt sticking out when I sat down, but I was too happy to let anything spoil

it. The Tube wasn't too busy, and I suppose a nice thing about

Christmas is that it makes most people nice and so lots of people smiled at us and said nice things, even strangers. There was a pretty Japanese girl sitting next to Mama on the train, and she smiled at us,

but then looked a little sad.

What happened on the train was very scary but I think it had a happy ending. Oh, but of course when you tell a story you are not supposed to say that, are you? Then you don't feel excited or scared because you already know that everything will be all right in the end. Anyway, it is a very exciting story so you must listen, okay?

Across from us was a long-haired boy with glasses, wearing some

kind of black heavy metal T-shirt under his anorak. He was listening to an MP3 player, quite loudly, I could hear the *bom-kish bom-kish* of the drums even over the rumble of the train. He looked like a geek. I know you aren't supposed to say that, but he did.

These nasty men got on. They smelled really bad and were very

drunk. One of them, a tall man in a soldier's coat, looked quite ill.

They were using bad language, all 'f this' and 'f that' and Papa looked quite cross. I thought he might say something, as he gripped my hand tight, but I squeezed back and he looked at me, and I smiled, and he shrugged and his eyes crinkled.

At the next stop, the Doctor and Jo got on the train. I remember that is what they called each other. It was so unusual I can remember

everything very clearly, though I can't remember any jokes from the panto! The Doctor was quite old, maybe older than Grandpa was

before he died, but he was really fit and energetic, and slim. He looked very smart. Jo had a nice sheepskin jacket but I really remember the boots, because Sara at school has some almost the same, but when I asked to get some Papa said no, because little girls should dress like little girls. Well, after my bat mitzvah I won't be a little girl any more, so I can get some boots like that.

The Doctor had a computer or something, and was pointing it at

people, as if he was testing them. The nasty men made some comments and one of them tried to touch Jo's bottom, but she stopped him. The Doctor looked very stern then, like Mr Dennis at school does when you don't do your homework.

When the Doctor pointed his computer at the Japanese girl she

looked very frightened, but Jo told her that everything was okay and not to be scared, and the Doctor spoke to her too. The girl seemed really relieved then and said something in Japanese that both the Doctor and Jo seemed to understand.

Then the man in the soldier's coat stood up. He was shaking and

staring at something. He was saying over and over again, 'The end of the world... the end of the world...' Jo pulled the Doctor's sleeve and pointed. The Doctor approached him, and begun talking to him in a strange language. The man replied but he seemed quite ill. I don't think he was drunk, like the others. Perhaps the Doctor was there to find him 187

and help him.

But then the lights went out Mama was scared and put her arm

around me and put her head down, but I wanted to see what was

happening. There were flashes of light, like suddenly they were taking pictures like they do with famous people. The Doctor and the big man were fighting. Jo looked really scared. She was holding on to the bar overhead and she had one hand to her mouth.

It was very strange, like watching a cartoon, as the flashes made still pictures that changed with every flash. I have a book like that, every page has a drawing that is slightly different, but when you flick through the pages very that with your thumb, they move like a film.

The Doctor was not hurt and he beat the big man back. I couldn't see now because Mama's hair had fallen forward like a curtain. Before I could wriggle out to see there was a big flash and Mama screamed so loud I could feel it in my chest. But then everything was okay again, and when she sat back I could see that the big man had disappeared. Jo looked very relieved.

'It's over, Jo,' said the Doctor. 'I tried to talk him round, but he was too far gone. If only we had been sooner.'

‘Well, at least we stopped him before... you know,’ said Jo. I don’t understand what she was talking about, but that is what she said.

‘What shall we do now, Doctor? Shall we stay in this time for

Christmas?’ She definitely said that, but it doesn’t make sense.

‘No,’ the Doctor said. ‘Let’s go home. We don’t want the Brigadier to worry, now do we? Come on!’

Then they smiled, and got off at the next stop. Everyone was all right and, somehow, carried on like nothing had happened. I wanted to talk to Papa about it later, but he said he couldn’t remember and Mama just told me not to think about it. There was nothing on the news either. It was very strange, like a mystery book. But I won’t forget. Maybe I’ll write it down and make a proper story out of it one day.

Extracts end.

Cross reference to UNIT Field Report X2359832/1972

Investigation Complete

Report Closed

Authorisation: Brig. A. G. Lethbridge-Stewart,

UNIT Field Commander, signed 25/12/72

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Dr Cadabra

Trevor Baxendale

An Adventure of the Sixth Doctor, with Mel

I hate office parties. As a rule I try to avoid them, but, due to a particularly vicious round of office politics this year, I ended up helping to organise the Big Christmas Bash. Can you believe that? I mean, the reason I absolutely hate them, normally, is because I can’t stand the awkward social posing that goes with them like snot with a cold, but here I was, clipboard in hand, having to scrape one together.

There was no getting out of it. I’d been landed with the job by my deputy line manager, because it was, apparently, something I could

‘add to my curriculum vitae’. He never said CV, only the full-on Latin, but then he was the biggest pseud I’d ever met and a sanctimonious prig to boot. But enough of that. Back to the party. Yay.

Having no idea where to even start, I did enlist the help of two

willing stooges. There was Gilbert from accounts, whose list-making skills were second-to-none and who tackled every task given to him with a quiet, but maniacal, desire to complete it to the very best of his ability. The management loved him. The other little helper I chose was Rachel, the vacuous sub-beauty queen from resources. Actually, that’s probably a bit unfair, and I do feel a bit guilty, bearing in mind what eventually happened during the party, but there we are. More of Rachel later.

In the end, Gilbert took on more than his fair share of responsibilities for the party, such as the food and drink and all that kind of stuff –

which had been my plan exactly – and I was left to organise the

entertainment. I wanted to hire a band, but there was no one I knew who would do it for free. Jack Pollitt on the sixth floor was reputed to be in a band, quite a good one actually, but I had a long-term feud with Pollitt over a parking space in the staff car park and I was damned if I was going cap in hand to him.

So I was left with a problem. There had to be some kind of

entertainment. Lord help us if we were all going to stand around the

table in the office, staring at all the nibbles and cans of beer and plastic lemonade bottles while people tried to make futile small talk with their bosses, with nothing to distract us.

Then I had a great idea.

In fact, it was brilliant. It was easy to set up and would be the perfect way to ensure that I was never, ever, asked to organise another office patty – or indeed have anything to do with one whatsoever. Result!

During the summer my sister had held a party for her daughter’s

seventh birthday; she’d hired a children’s entertainer. He was superb –

magic tricks, jokes, bendy balloons, the whole kit and caboodle. At the

end, when he was packing up, he'd handed out some cards to the grown-ups and, oddly enough, I had automatically put one in my wallet. I think I'd felt a bit sorry for him, because he said he wasn't getting very many bookings any more. The competition was getting really stiff, apparently. Most kids wanted actors decked out as Spider-Man or Wolverine these days. So now was the perfect chance – he would probably take any booking he could get, which was perfect for my purposes.

One problem – when I checked my wallet the card had gone. I had everything else: taxi cards, business cards, credit cards, but no sign of the wretched kid's entertainer. He was so good he'd even made his card vanish from my wallet, I thought.

So now what? *Yellow Pages*. I scanned the pages relating to children's parties and eventually found some entertainers and magicians. I couldn't see my guy listed anywhere, although to be honest I couldn't even remember his name. These people all had cheesy stage names anyway: Magic Mick, Professor Pop, Bobby Balloons, et cetera. I tried the first three I saw; one of them had quite a big advert, but without any luck. Two of them were all booked up and the third wasn't answering the phone. I rang another one who checked his diary and said that, although he was free on the day in question, it was a bit far for him to come as he lived out of town and would have to charge travelling expenses. I asked for a quote and when he told me how much extra it would cost I thanked him and put the phone down.

There was one left in the *Yellow Pages* – unlike the others, this guy had just one line, with his name and phone number, and no advert. He called himself Dr Cadabra. I liked him already.

'Hello?'

'Hi. Is that, erm, Dr Cadabra?'

'It is.'

‘Great. I wonder if I could book you for a party?’ I gave him the date and an approximate time and Dr Cadabra checked his diary. He then asked if the party was for children or adults, which took me by surprise 190

a bit.

‘Er, adults,’ I said. ‘It’s for an office Christmas party, to be honest.

We wanted something a bit different this year,’ I added limply.

He said that would be fine and agreed to the time, date and a very reasonable fee. Easy as that.

‘Yes!’ I thought to myself, punching the air triumphantly. All sorted.

My first, and hopefully last, office party done and dusted.

When the day came, I found I was actually looking forward to it.

Weird. Although, to be truthful, I was probably looking forward to seeing everyone’s face when they clapped eyes on the fabulous Dr

Cadabra. Gilbert was still organising the last-minute stuff, and a couple of guys had taken on responsibility for the booze. There were crates of beer and lager arriving and plenty of cola and lemonade. Some of the girls had brought in crisps and nibbles too. Before long we had a spread laid out on the main table – two office desks pulled together –

that was almost, but not quite, appetising. There was lots of tinsel about and some of those horrid metallic lanterns hanging from the ceiling, the kind that collapse flat so you can pack them away and put them somewhere you forget all about by the following Christmas.

I helped myself to a beer and reflected on a job well done. The girls were all dolled up, of course, having brought their party frocks in and changed in the toilets. We had wall-to-wall push-up bras, little black dresses and an abundance of make-up. The guys were assembling at

one end of the office, each man issued with a can of something, where they stood and talked about Bristol City’s latest signing, studiously ignoring the girls who had all transformed from colleagues into

stunners in the space of an afternoon. It was all so artificial. How could anyone seriously be on the pull here? Everyone knew everyone.

We

were all the same people who sat around all day in front of computers and complained about the work and the management. Now, suddenly,

we were party goers. Woo-hoo!

‘So, where’s the entertainment, then?’ asked a voice loudly in my ear. It was Rachel. She was holding a paper cup full of white wine and having to speak up over the sound of *So This Is Christmas* being played on the cheap CD player Gilbert had provided for the occasion.

Rachel was good-looking, in a slightly horsey way, and she knew it.

She was always dolled up, even on a normal day at the office, so she had turned the mascara and lipstick up to warp factor nine for the party.

There was glitter on her eyelids too. She was swaying from side to side, dancing to a beat that had nothing to do with what was playing on the CD as far as I could tell. In any other circumstance I’d have found Rachel pretty attractive but I knew her of old. She was one cold-191

hearted fox who had chewed up and spat out more men than I’d

probably even met.

‘I said, where’s the entertainment?’ she yelled again, thinking I hadn’t heard. ‘Someone said you’d got a male stripper in!’ She cackled loudly at this and screwed her nose up, obviously pleased with herself.

I feigned an indulgent smile and checked my watch. ‘He should be

here by now, actually,’ I told her. ‘I’ll go and check in case security won’t let him in.’

‘What will he be dressed as?’ she said. ‘A policeman or a fireman?’

‘Probably a clown.’ I said.

I went down to the lobby, where it was mercifully quiet and a hell of a lot cooler. On the phone, Dr Cadabra had checked with me that there would be somewhere to put his stuff – all of the usual magician’s gubbins, I presumed – when he arrived. I’d told him to leave it in the foyer and I’d come down and help him take it up in the lift if need be. I had hoped the guys on security would call up to the office when the

old guy arrived so that I could come down to collect him.

But the foyer was empty – or at least there were no security guards here. Actually, to say it was empty was not quite true. Not quite true by a rather large margin, in fact.

The magic gubbins had arrived, all right there was a large, gaudily painted box, a top hat, a bag of balloons, a big mirror and several metal hoops lying on the floor.

Further along, parked right next to the lifts, was a whopping great blue box. It was pretty old and a bit bashed about, with panelled doom and little frosted windows positioned too high up for me to peer

through. Along the top was a large illuminated panel that said 'police public call box'.

Clearly this was part of the magician's equipment too, but what it was for I couldn't guess. If it was one of those magic cabinets they use to make people disappear or stick swords through while someone was chained up inside I couldn't tell, but one thing was for sure: there was no way we could get it up to the office. In fact, I wasn't sure how anyone could have got the thing into the lobby. Maybe it had come in pieces, like a flat-pack wardrobe, and been assembled inside.

Suddenly one of the box's doom opened and Dr Cadabra stepped

out. He was a lot younger than I'd expected, and bigger too – but still dressed like a clown in striped yellow trousers, orange spats and green shoes. There was a flashy waistcoat straining over his stomach and a long, multicoloured coat with one big pink lapel and one yellow. I groaned inwardly. This was too much. What had seemed like the ideal prank suddenly felt like a joke that was going to fall monstrously flat.

'Hello,' he said, in a voice that sounded fruitier and more refined than on the phone. He had eyes like a cat and a big mop of curly blond hair.

'Hi,' I said. Always ready with the witty riposte, me. 'Dr Cadabra?'

'Doctor who?'

'Dr Cadabra.'

‘It’s just “Doctor”, actually,’ said another voice as someone else emerged from the box. This was a pretty redhead for whom the word petite must have been invented. Things were looking up. Clearly the assistant, she was wearing a spangly top and tailored trousers, although the outfit looked as if it had been designed in the eighties. ‘And I’m Mel,’ she added, smiling nicely.

‘Hi,’ I said again. I looked at my watch. ‘I was expecting you a bit earlier, actually.’

Dr Cadabra frowned. ‘Really? You were?’

‘No matter,’ I said. ‘We can go straight up, if you’re ready. I’ll help you with your stuff, but I’m afraid this thing will have to stay down here.’ I tapped the blue box.

Dr Cadabra eyed me curiously. Honestly, you’d think he didn’t have a clue why he was here. My heart sank again when I realised he was probably drunk. Some old soak who got through all his performances with the help of a bottle of voddie, no doubt. Just my luck.

His assistant, Mel, was inspecting the smaller cabinet and hoops and mirror and stuff. I thought she was probably checking to see if

everything was still there. While she bent over the Doctor and I were rewarded with a view that confirmed the real magic of Christmas once again. I glanced sideways at him to clock his reaction but the guy seemed not to notice; he was glaring at me, actually.

‘Where, exactly, are we, young man?’ he demanded.

‘Er, this is the entrance foyer,’ I said, taken aback. Young man? He couldn’t have been more than two years older than me. ‘The party’s upstairs on the sixth floor. Lift’s over there.’

‘Party?’ said the girl, straightening up and smiling again. She was *very* smiley; I decided I liked her.

I pointed to the tinsel around the security officer’s desk and the ceiling. ‘Christmas,’ I said, in a yoo-hoo, wake-up tone of voice.

‘Christmas?’ barked the Doctor in a voice so loud I actually jumped.

‘Christmas? But I set the coordinates for New Year’s Eve!’ He turned and rapped his knuckles on the police box as if he was blaming the thing.

‘Ha, yes, very good,’ I said, laughing along. But if we could get this stuff up to the sixth floor...?’

‘What year is this?’ asked Mel.

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I told her automatically. I really wanted to move these two along now.

‘You mean it’s not even 1999?’ thundered the Doctor.

‘You missed!’ said Mel happily. ‘Again! That’s a fiver you owe me, Doc.’ She poked a tiny digit into his bicep.

I watched the pair of them, dumbfounded. If this was part of their act then it was a bit lame. Feeling a little impatient now I gestured towards the lift. ‘Shall we...?’

‘Shall we what?’ asked the Doctor.

‘Your magic act. It’s time we got on, to be honest.’ I held my hand out towards the lift once again.

‘Magic act?’

‘Oh, Doctor, don’t you see?’ Mel pointed to the equipment on the

floor. ‘These all belong to a magician or something. Look, there’s a box full of tricks and things and even a top hat!’ She perched the topper on her ginger curls and struck a pose.

The Doctor seemed amused, his earlier poor temper vanishing like a rabbit. ‘Oh, I love magic tricks. Let’s see.’ He rummaged in the box and found a magic wand – the traditional glossy black one with white tips.

By now I was getting a bit exasperated. I didn’t want them to start until we were upstairs, but they were already in full flow. The Doctor flicked the wand and it transformed into a bunch of vulgarly coloured flowers. Mel tittered and clapped like she’d never seen him do it before.

I’d had enough by now. ‘Well, if you could just follow me,’ I said, picking up the box of tricks and the mirror to show willing. I moved towards the lift.

‘My dear young man,’ began the Doctor. ‘I think you might have

mistaken me for someone else...'

I turned and gave him my most withering look. 'Listen, mate... You look like a children's entertainer, you sound like a children's

entertainer... in my book, that makes you a children's entertainer. I know this may not be your normal audience, but I've paid my money and it's time for you to deliver.'

Mel found this absolutely hilarious for some reason, although Dr

Cadabra looked apoplectic. I didn't bother waiting for a reply; I just stepped into the lift and pressed the button for the sixth floor.

Thankfully, Dr Cadabra and his glamorous assistant finally got their act together and put on a show. They emerged from the lift arguing, actually, and there was talk of the Doctor winning back his fiver if he could convince everyone he was a magician. Mel certainly knew how to work him; he was obviously a compulsive gambler as well as an old
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soak. Everyone gathered around to watch him. It was painful. Thirty or so very cynical adults at a rubbish party, forced to watch a kids'

entertainer. I could feel my toes curling in my shoes, but the plan was working brilliantly; my boss was already giving me the evil eye, and my chances of ever being given this kind of responsibility again were dwindling fast. Hurrah!

Dr Cadabra worked through his box of tricks as if he'd never seen them before. I quickly realised that this was part of his act, and that he was trying to do a deliberately incompetent magic show like Tommy Cooper. Fair enough; the only problem was that Cooper had funny

bones, and the Doctor didn't.

Mel did a good job as his assistant, although she kept looking as if she was going to burst out laughing, as if this was all some big private joke. For a second I wondered if they really weren't the people I had booked after all, but then I checked the Doctor's costume out again and I knew I was right.

After a while he began to get better, making coins disappear in his hands and reappear out of people's ears, all the usual stuff. He did the trick with the wand again, and pulled a string of coloured flags out of

his sleeve that must have been a hundred feet long. Even he looked surprised at that, and people did start to chuckle.

So things were starting to go right at that point. But not for long.

Very soon after that they started to go wrong.

Really wrong.

It was the mirror trick that did it. I reckoned the Doctor was coming to the end of his act, not to mention his tether, and he finally picked up the mirror. It was oval, about two feet by one, with an ornate but crummy-looking gilt frame. The glass itself was speckled around the edges as if the silver was coming off the back. It looked like it would be a strange trick, and the first one of the entire act where I didn't know or couldn't guess what was going to happen. I suppose everyone else felt the same way, because when the Doctor picked the mirror up a frisson of interest ran through the whole group. Even those who were quietly chatting to each other during the rest of the show stopped talking and paid attention. It was as if we could all sense that this was to be the last trick, the pièce de résistance. Even the magician seemed slightly taken aback, as if he wasn't quite sure he knew what he was looking at. He paused for a minute, his hesitation only adding to the atmosphere, before shrugging and throwing his arms out in his most theatrical gesture yet.

'May I have a volunteer from the audience, please?' asked Dr

Cadabra.

Automatically attracted to any mirror, Rachel put her hand up and
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rushed forward with a mucous giggle. Mel took her hand and led her over to the Doctor and the mirror.

The Doctor held up the mirror so that Rachel could see her own

reflection. He asked what her name was and then said, 'Now, Rachel, I'm sure you're no stranger to a mirror...' This produced a rueful laugh from the crowd and a lemony smile from Rachel. 'I want you to look into Melanie's Magical Mirror of Mesmerism.:

'You're not gonna hypnotise me, are you?' asked Rachel.

'Nothing so mundane!' Dr Cadabra seemed to be warming to his

own performance now. He held the mirror closer. ‘Look at your reflection... pierce the Veil of Time... and tell us what you see!’

People were sniggering but fascinated at the same time. Rachel peered at her reflection and then suddenly gasped.

And so did the crowd.

Because we could all see her reflection too. Or rather, we could see the reflection of a little girl aged about seven or eight. She had freckles and loose, mousy-blonde hair pushed back with a Barbie hair band.

Silence. I stood up straight now, feeling the hairs on my neck stand up. I didn’t know how the Doctor was doing this trick but it was very good. His best trick by a long way.

Rachel gave a little squeak and held up her hand to touch the mirror.

Brilliantly, the little girl reflected in the mirror did exactly the same thing. ‘That’s me,’ said Rachel in a tiny, shocked voice. ‘When I was little.’ And it was. The resemblance was clear. Anyone who knew Rachel could see that it was her, but twenty-odd years ago, before the sun and Max Factor had got to work on her skin and before she’d dyed her hair completely blonde. Or, as some might describe it, yellow.

A murmur of amazement and approval passed through the crowd and culminated in clapping. Some people asked if they could be next.

But the trick wasn’t over. Before our eyes, the little girl Rachel began to grow up in the mirror at a phenomenal rate. We could see her face growing larger, bones shaping themselves into the features of an adult, her hair lengthening and curling in waves. Gradually, but swiftly, the girl was growing into the Rachel we knew and tolerated. But she was subtly different. This Rachel looked fresher, prettier, happier.

Instead of the little girl’s eyes growing smaller and sharper as the years took their toll on innocence, they grew wider and greener and more beautiful. There was a spark of delight and contentment in those eyes that I had never seen in Rachel’s. It was strange, and rather moving.

I switched my attention to the Doctor, because I wanted to see how he was reacting to this brilliant trick. It was on a completely different level from any of his previous tricks. But the Doctor was looking concerned – and it was a look that suddenly changed to anxiety. He

wasn't looking at the reflection, either. He was looking at Rachel herself.

I still get the shivers thinking about it now. I looked back at Rachel and, at about the same time, everyone else realised something was wrong too. There was a collective intake of breath as we watched

Rachel herself start to grow older before our very eyes. The image in the mirror stayed exactly as it was – a bright, beautiful twenty-something. But Rachel aged. Rapidly. As we watched her skin sunk

into her cheeks, turning grey and gaunt, and she let out a gasp of pain.

Her features dried up and withered like a summer leaf passing straight through to the end of autumn in the blink of an eye.

And all the while, the reflection stayed healthy and successful-

looking, almost as if the minor was sucking the life out of Rachel.

'Get her away from the mirror!' roared Dr Cadabra, snapping

everyone out of a horrified trance. Mel grabbed hold of Rachel, but Rachel's grip on the mirror was too strong. Her gnarled, arthritic fingers were curled around the frame like a vulture's talons.

'Smash the mirror!' shouted Mel, letting go of her and looking

around for something to hit it with.

'No,' the Doctor ordered. 'Too dangerous – we don't know what

will happen.' He reached out and placed his hand over Rachel's ancient face, but gently, his fingers spread out in a curious manner. She suddenly fell limp, as if he had simply switched her off, and her skeletal fingers slipped free of the mirror. Mel caught Rachel and lowered her to the ground. Aged about eighty or ninety, she must have weighed next to nothing.

The Doctor swung the mirror around to face him and looked into it.

Even then, in the midst of the confusion and the cries, I thought this was an insanely brave thing to do. I simply couldn't imagine what he was hoping to achieve. In fact, I was so shocked by his actions that I found myself springing forward to join him. Something inside me

wanted to help. Something inside me wanted to know what was

happening.

As if things weren't already bizarre enough, what happened next

took it all to a new level. While Mel looked after the old lady who used to be Rachel from resources, the Doctor looked into the minor – and I looked with him. I fully expected to see the Doctor's reflection and perhaps my own – maybe even ourselves as children. But I was wrong.

Inside the mirror we could still see the younger, fitter Rachel, and alongside her was someone else entirely, another man, older than either of us, with long dark hair surrounding a haggard face and little round glasses. He stared out at us, and with a thrill of fear I knew,

instinctively, that he could see us.

'Help me!' said the old man. I couldn't hear a thing, but I read his lips easily enough. It was like he was on the other side of a sheet of soundproof glass.

'Who are you?' the Doctor asked. 'No – let me guess: it's Dr

Cadabra, isn't it?'

I shot a frown at the Doctor. I thought he was Dr Cadabra. Who was this guy in the mirror, then? He didn't look like a children's entertainer

– more Ozzy Osbourne than Ali Bongo.

The old man held his hands out towards us.

'Hold the mirror,' the Doctor instructed me. He spoke in such a way that I found myself doing exactly as I was told. I grasped the mirror from behind as he did the impossible.

Well, there's no easy way to explain it. The Doctor simply plunged his

hands into the mirror. Not through it, he didn't smash it, he just reached into it. His arms disappeared up to the elbows like he was leaning into a hole in a wall.

'Got you!' he shouted, and then pulled back. Bony white hands were locked around the Doctor's wrists in a desperate fireman's grip. The Doctor hauled the old man up out of the mirror and there was a sound I can't describe – except to say that it was like a window shattering, only backwards. With a terrible scream the old bloke's head emerged from the mirror like a drowning man coming up for air one last time.

'I've got you!' yelled the Doctor. 'Come on, right the way through!'

'I can't!' croaked the old man. 'The mirror won't let me go. I've tried.'

'It's not really a mirror,' the Doctor told him earnestly. 'It's a temporal meniscus stretched over the surface of the glass. It's nothing more than an abhorrent parlour trick. You can break free!'

I wasn't really following this now, but the old man was clearly in a lot of pain. 'I can't!' he gasped. 'I mustn't!'

I peered around the edge of the mirror, and saw Rachel's reflection standing behind the old guy. She was just watching him struggle, and smiling. Not as nice and innocent as I thought, then. 'She's keeping him there,' I said in a sudden moment of clarity. 'Rachel's reflection –

she won't let him go.'

The Doctor glanced at me and then peered at the blonde in the

mirror. 'It's not Rachel,' he said firmly. 'It's a time effigy.'

'Call it what you effing like,' I said, 'but it's killing the real Rachel and keeping this guy trapped in the mirror.'

'Temporal meniscus,' said the Doctor automatically.

'She won't let me go,' the old man said. 'But you mustn't let this happen to anyone else! Smash the mirror! Please – smash the mirror!'

'Let me pull you out first,' insisted the Doctor.

'You can't! You mustn't! I can keep her trapped in here with me

while you break the mirror!'

The Doctor looked desolate. 'But – you'll die. I can't let that

happen!'

'If you pull me out, she'll come with me. It'll never stop.'

'Hang on,' I said, my mouth a little drier than I would have liked,

'who is "she"?'

'The meniscus,' said the Doctor quietly. 'It's how he sees it.'

'Let me go,' said the old man again, and this time he released his own grip on the Doctor's arms. He fell back into the mirror with

another shattering, sucking noise. The Doctor fell back too, with a bellow of pain or frustration, I couldn't tell which. Maybe it was both.

I reacted then, without thinking. Maybe it was for the best. I'm

pretty sure it saved Rachel's life, anyway. I raised the mirror high over my head and then brought it down hard on the corner of the table. It broke into a thousand pieces, sending bits of jagged glass spinning everywhere. I thought I heard the shriek of someone splintering, but that may have been my imagination. And who could blame it.

The Doctor wasted no time in checking Rachel. Mel lifted the old

girl into a sitting position, and by the time her eyes were fluttering open beneath the weight of her false lashes, Rachel had shed all of her advanced years and looked back to normal.

'She's fine,' said the Doctor with evident relief as he checked her pulse. 'She's going to be all right, thank goodness.'

'What was that thing?' Mel asked, addressing the Doctor. It was

curious – they didn't seem all that shocked, almost as if they saw this sort of stuff every day.

'Just a horrible trick, beloved of unscrupulous conmen from the Old Time,' he told her. He spoke like he really meant it too. 'They're artificial constructs existing in only two dimensions, but they possess a rudimentary intelligence and a malevolent thirst for power and torment.

They're banned in almost every part of the universe and every era. But some do turn up occasionally, lost or discarded by time-travelling space gypsies.'

'Has it gone?'

'Yes.' He looked at me sadly. 'Smashing the mirror was the right

thing to do.'

'And what about that poor man? What was he doing in the mirror?'

'Mirrors can be very dangerous things, Mel. The people of Earth are notoriously blasé about them. Vampires fear them; Time Lords are

suspicious of them... and with very good reason. They can be used as short cuts – to Other Places. At first even I thought I was using a mere prop. The real owner didn't stand a chance. He'd have no way of

knowing that a temporal meniscus had attached itself to the glass. One look and that was it – he was trapped. Terrible...'

They helped Rachel to a chair and someone fetched her a gin and

tonic. After a while people began to clap Dr Cadabra on the shoulder and tell him that it had been a fantastic show. He accepted their praise with surprising dignity and modesty, although he did consent to

signing a couple of autographs and posing for a photo.

'One hell of an office party,' my boss told me later with grudging admiration. 'Make sure you get him back next year, won't you?'

I took the Doctor and Mel back down to the foyer. The party was about to break up anyway, with some people heading home while the

younger ones went into town to find a club. Everyone was pretty

excited and feeling happy. Rachel had become a minor celebrity – even more than she already had been, I suppose, and was now lapping up all the attention. It was good to see her back to normal.

I didn't want to hang around any longer myself, and I could see Dr Cadabra and Mel were keen to get away too.

‘Did you come in a van or something?’ I asked them in the lobby.

‘Or can I call you a taxi?’

‘No, thanks,’ said Mel. ‘We have our own transport!’

‘One last trick,’ the Doctor smiled at me as he opened the door of the old blue police box and ushered his glamorous assistant inside. ‘Watch this very carefully.’

He followed her in and shut the door. I stepped back and prepared to watch, wondering if I would be able to see how it was done.

Christmas Yet to Come

‘Ghost of the Future!’ he exclaimed. ‘I fear you more than any

spectre I have seen.’

– *A Christmas Carol*, Charles Dickens

Far Away in a Manger

lain McLaughlin & Claire Bartlett

An Adventure of the Fifth Doctor, with Peri and Erimem

‘Not here,’ Gabe said to himself. ‘Just not here.’ Out loud, he said,

‘It’s okay, Kate. We’re nearly there.’ He forced confidence into his voice and hoped Kate wouldn’t notice that it was an act. But she

was too busy clutching her swollen stomach and catching ragged

breaths of freezing, snowy air. Gabe wasn’t lying.

A few moments earlier the blizzard had breathed, letting them see the lights of the little town beckoning to them but then the snow had returned and eaten the lights. Along with the lights it seemed to have devoured the last of Kate’s strength. She was exhausted and

for the first time Gabe began to really doubt that they would make it to the settlement. With the thought came panic. Not here. They

couldn’t fail here, not when the town was so close. They just

couldn't.

'Hello, there!'

The voice came through the snow. Gabe peered into the blizzard.

Three figures were making their way towards him. The tallest,

dressed in white, seemed to merge with the snow until he was

almost on top of them. As they approached, Gabe saw that the other two were young women. Late teens or maybe twenty at a stretch, a

good ten years younger than their friend. Despite the conditions, the man in white smiled broadly. 'I was wondering if you could tell us where we are.'

'Love to,' Gabe answered, shifting his arm more securely around

Kate's shoulders. 'But I'm a bit busy just now.'

The man's eyes flicked to Kate, down to her obviously pregnant

stomach and then back to Gabe. 'So I see. We need to get her to

shelter.' 'That's what I was trying to do when my tractor packed in.

We were heading for town. It's about a kilometre that way.' Gabe

wafted an arm in the direction – he hoped – of the settlement.

The stranger squinted then nodded. It's not far.' He turned to his companions. 'Peri, Erimem. Give her a hand.' While his friends

each took one of Kate's arms, the tall man ushered Gabe to show

the way. 'Probably best if you lead.'

'Probably.' Gabe nodded, both grateful of the help and

uncomfortable at putting Kate into strangers' hands. 'Who are you?

I know everybody in the colony.'

The man smiled. 'That's a long story.'

‘No, it isn’t,’ one of the women piped up in what sounded like an old American accent. ‘Short story is he can’t drive his spaceship for peanuts. I’m Peri, by the way. That’s Erimem and the lousy driver calls himself the Doctor.’

Erimem, shorter and darker-skinned than her friend, nodded a

greeting. ‘Hello.’ But Gabe wasn’t paying attention.

‘You’re a doctor?’ he said to the newcomer.

‘Well, yes. Which way?’

‘What? Oh, over here.’ Gabe led the group over a small prow.

The sudden unexpected appearance of help had lifted him. He

wondered if it was the knowledge that he wasn’t dealing with the

situation alone or if it was because this newcomer was a doctor.

Whichever it was, he drew comfort from the gentle way the two

girls helped Kate and the confident manner the Doctor had when he talked to his friends. The panic had faded from Kate’s eyes and he knew that she felt the same relief that he did.

Ultimately, it took them almost twenty minutes to reach the town.

It was one street and scarcely deserved the title of town but the relief of seeing the ugly, blocky buildings was overwhelming. Gabe squeezed Kate’s hand. They had been forced to stop twice as pain

had doubled her over. While Peri and Erimem encouraged Kate, the

Doctor had quizzed Gabe about the planet, the colony and the

climate. Gabe was certain it was intended to divert his attention from worrying about Kate and he accepted the distraction,

explaining the sudden cold weather and its effects on the colonists experiencing their first winter on this world.

‘It hit two days ago and hasn’t stopped since. When it took out

the power lines we couldn’t risk staying in the cold and dark with Kate already a week late, so we headed for town.’

The Doctor nodded absently, only half listening. ‘A-ha!’ he

stated, triumphantly pointing at one of the ugly square houses. A tree, decorated with coloured balls, was bowing precariously under the thick covering of snow. Another door had a wreath made of

something local that looked slightly like holly. ‘Christmas! I

promised you Christmas and snow. Here you have both.’

‘Nice try, Doctor,’ Peri said sourly. ‘But I wanted Christmas and snow *on Earth*. You know, busy stores with rude shoppers, drunk 203

Santas, guys leaving it to the last minute before they buy the wrong thing completely, Bing Crosby singing *White Christmas*, *It’s a Wonderful Life* on TV... snow and an alien excuse for a tree just doesn’t cut it.’

‘There’s no pleasing some people.’ The Doctor turned to Gabe.

‘Where now?’

Gabe looked along the street and for the first time noticed that the row of buildings had slipped into darkness at some time in the past few minutes. The warm glow that had had shone in the windows

had gone leaving the windows looking dark and cold. The only

building still showing lights was the large, ugly grey structure that blocked the far end of the street. A few tractors were parked

haphazardly in front of it. Clearly other homesteaders had headed for safety as well.

‘The central power plant,’ Gabe explained to the Doctor. ‘The

power for the entire community goes through there.’

A door in one of the nearest buildings opened and two figures

wrapped in heavy coats and carrying bundles emerged. One spotted

Gabe and waved, indicating the power plant, then hurrying after her friend.

The Doctor nodded at the women as they disappeared into the

plant. ‘Looks like everyone’s heading there.’

‘Ana and Val,’ Gabe explained. ‘If they’re leaving their house,

things must be bad.’ Kate moaned and Gabe cursed himself for not

keeping his mouth shut.

The interior of the power plant was hardly more appealing than

its exterior. It was basically a single giant chamber roughly fifteen metres across, dominated by the generator, an enormous cylinder

three metres in diameter in the centre that stretched from the floor to the ceiling. There were rooms set into the walls on each of the three levels. Colonists had already taken possession of rooms and had

begun to settle in. They looked at Gabe’s party with vague interest for a moment then went back to their own families.

‘Friendly bunch,’ Peri muttered.

Gabe ignored her. ‘Kate? Told you we’d make it, no problem.’

She managed only a slight twist of her mouth in answer.

‘This one.’ While Gabe had been looking to Kate, the Doctor had

chosen a room for them. It was towards the back of the chamber and was large enough for all of them to gather comfortably.

Unfortunately, that was where the comfort ended. Dull metal

lockers lined the furthest wall with a small computer terminal on another. Apart from one sad, battered old chair at the terminal, the room was empty. The Doctor seemed to read Gabe’s thoughts on

the room. ‘It’s the most private of the rooms on this level, and in one of the open lockers –’ he reached out and plucked a blanket ‘–

fire blankets. Not exactly five-star comfort but better than a metal floor.’

Kate sank into the solitary chair. ‘I’m past worrying about

comfort, Doctor.’

‘I’ll do it’ Peri took the blankets from the Doctor and started to lay them on the floor.

Erimem caught her arm. ‘Wait,’ she said, before turning to Gabe.

‘You are farmers.’ He wasn’t sure if it was a question or a statement so he just nodded. ‘So, if you are farmers, there will be straw.’

Again, Gabe nodded. ‘Well, I guess so.’

‘Straw is softer than this floor.’ When Gabe didn’t answer she

carried on, shaking her head as if he was an idiot. ‘If we make a bed of straw then cover it with the blankets she will be more

comfortable.’

Slowly, it all clicked into place in Gabe’s weary brain. ‘Right,’ he said. ‘I’ll get some straw.’

‘Excellent idea,’ the Doctor murmured absently, his eyes roaming

the room.

‘Doctor,’ Peri asked. ‘What is it?’

‘We’re going to need a few things,’ he said thoughtfully.

‘Like hot water and towels? They always ask for hot water and

towels in the movies.’

‘Hollywood has a great deal to answer for,’ the Doctor said,

shaking his head sadly. ‘No, I mean medical supplies and the like.’

‘Our medic’s house is just outside town,’ Gabe offered, glad to

actually be able to offer something constructive. ‘He’s out at the edge of the colony but I’ll go and get what you need.’

‘Don’t even think about it!’ Kate hissed. Another wave of pain

cut off anything else she planned to say. She just gripped Gabe’s hand so tight he had to make an effort not to wince.

‘Peri and I will do it,’ Erimem said firmly.

‘We will?’

‘It should not be difficult.’ Erimem pointed cheerfully out of the door. Dozens of people had arrived in the power plant in the past few minutes. ‘I will find someone to take me to this healer’s house while you get the straw.’

It took a few minutes before Kate could be persuaded to let Gabe

leave her side. The Doctor had to promise that he would stay in the room with her until Gabe returned. As he left with Peri and an

impatient Erimem, Gabe felt a terrible stab of guilt at leaving Kate even for a short time.

‘Don’t mind, Erimem,’ Peri said conspiratorially. ‘She’s used to

ruling the world. She can be a bit bossy sometimes, but she doesn’t mean anything by it.’

‘Do I not?’ Erimem asked imperiously. ‘In my palace I would

have had your head cut off just for saying that’

Peri wrinkled her nose and stuck her tongue out at her friend.

Erimem replied by doing the same.

While Erimem disappeared to talk to a family who were crammed

into what looked like a store cupboard, Gabe led the way through a bright yellow door and along a blank corridor which led to an

airlock door. ‘All the buildings here are made from sections of the ship we came in,’ he explained. ‘It was all designed so we could use it when we got here.’ ‘Makes sense,’ Peri said. ‘Why bother

bringing a house when you can travel in it?’ She laughed. ‘Actually, the Doctor’s ship is kinda similar.’ Gabe ducked deeper into his

coat and gripped the airlock’s handle firmly. ‘Ready?’

Peri nodded and pulled up the hood of her coat.

The cold hit them hard, the wind stinging snow into their faces.

Thankfully, they only had to walk a dozen metres or so before they came to a metal barn. A couple of chickens twitched their feathers and a cow mooed with vague interest as they entered but the

animals quickly decided that staying warm was far more interesting than a couple of snow-covered humans and ignored Gabe and Peri

as they collected straw. It took four trips to the barn to collect enough straw to make a soft nest, over which Peri laid some of the blankets. She hung another over the doorway to give extra privacy.

On their trips to the barn, they caught occasional sights of Erimem trying to persuade weary farmers to lead her to the medic's house.

'She's wasting her time,' Gabe muttered sourly. 'Nobody does

anything for anybody here.'

Why not? That's dumb. You're a small community. You have to

stick together.'

Gabe shrugged. 'This is a rough planet to farm. Everybody works

from before dawn till after sundown. We're too busy trying to make our places work...'

'To make the place work as a community,' Peri interrupted.

'If the crops would raise themselves, we'd have time to sit round our camp-fires singing *Kumbaya*,' Gabe snapped and immediately he regretted it. 'Sorry, I shouldn't have been so sharp. I'm tired, I'm worried about Kate, the baby...'

'Nah, forget it,' Peri snorted. 'Being shouted at is a quiet day for me.'

'I think your friend's about to be shouted at,' Gabe said quietly.

Across the chamber, Erimem had approached a tall man who was

certainly the fattest person in the chamber. 'Walter Cantrell. When we landed here, everybody got equal shares of land in the valley.

He's already got five times as much as he started with.'

‘How?’

‘The usual. Shady trading, bribes, loans. There’s talk that he

poisoned the Jacksons’ herd so that he could sell them some of his cattle in exchange for part of their land. And then there’s just good old-fashioned theft.’ Gabe grimaced. ‘We travelled for 18 months to get here and the first thing we imported was corruption.’

‘And nobody does anything about this Cantrell because he’s got

this land?’

Gabe nodded. ‘The water for half the valley comes through land

he owns now. Anybody crosses him, he’ll stop their water. Add to

that, a lot of the people he cheated now have to work for him to

make ends meet.’

‘Where’s John Wayne when you need him?’ Peri asked sourly.

‘Who?’

‘You’ve never heard of John Wayne? If you people have

forgotten about Westerns you deserve all you get.’ She cut off.

‘Never mind.’ There was something in the set of Erimem’s face that said she had heard about Walter Cantrell and she didn’t like what she had heard. ‘She’s going to cause trouble.’

They couldn’t hear the beginning of Erimem’s conversation. She

tried to talk with Cantrell’s men but Cantrell kept interrupting and putting himself between Erimem and the men.

‘That’s not going to be good,’ Peri muttered.

A moment later Erimem’s voice was heard clear and crisp

through the chamber. ‘Do you know where the healer’s house is or

not?’

Cantrell’s laugh was equally clear. ‘Sure I do. It’s the one with the white roof. You can’t miss it.’

‘You will show me where it is.’

‘Go out? In that snow?’

‘Yes.’

Cantrell snorted. ‘Not on your life. I’m not risking my life for

some kid that’s nothing to do with me.’

‘Are you just selfish or a coward?’

‘Watch your mouth, girl.’

‘Why? What will you do? Steal my land? I have none here to

take.’

‘You’re making a big mistake.’

‘Do you threaten me? I have seen a hundred times worse than

you. I have faced worse than you in battle and left them drowning in their own blood.’ Erimem took a step towards Cantrell. ‘You are a thief, a bandit and a coward.’ She took another step forward and this time Cantrell actually took a half-step backwards. He stood a head taller than Erimem but she was talking down to him and he clearly didn’t like it. ‘You have your land and your possessions but you are worthless. You look to lead this community but you have nothing in your spirit to make you worthy of leading anyone. When you lead,

your task is to serve the needs of others, not yourself.’ Erimem’s face was flushed as she turned to the people who had gathered to

watch. ‘The rest of you, take your land back. If the law allows him to steal from you then it is a bad law. Replace it with a good one.’

A tired-looking farmer shook his head. ‘We can’t do that. The

council would never agree to it.’

‘Then replace them with a council who will!’ Erimem sounded

exasperated. ‘The Doctor said you choose your leaders, so choose

better ones!'

'Oh, God,' Gabe grumbled. 'She's a politician.'

Peri smiled sweetly. 'Actually she's a Pharaoh from ancient

Egypt who travels in a time machine.'

'What?'

'Or maybe I made that up. You decide.'

Erimem's speech seemed to be garnering some interest in the

little crowd. Two women in their thirties were leading a discussion.

'It would take an emergency vote – but if we get enough people to agree to it...'

'Now,' Erimem said loudly. 'Will someone take us to this

healer's house?'

One of the women who had been talking about the council moved

towards Erimem. 'I'll show you. I'm Val.'

'I'll come with you.' A tall, thin man in his mid twenties stepped out from the ranks of Cantrell's workers. 'What you need might be heavy.' He turned to a gangly, freckled man of roughly the same

age with sandy hair. 'Archie?'

Archie looked at Cantrell and then at his friend, Val and Erimem.

'All right. You'd just get lost if I let you go out on your own.'

By the time Erimem's party left for the medic's house, its number had risen to six. Another of Cantrell's men had offered himself and two others had slipped away to join their families, leaving Cantrell alone and looking much smaller than before.

'How did she do that?' Gabe muttered. 'If she stayed here a week

she'd rule the place.'

'Must be something to do with the living-god thing,' Peri said

thoughtfully. ‘Either that or she just keeps talking until people agree. And she’s done with ruling the world. Tried it; didn’t like it.’

Gabe followed Peri, not sure if she was serious or if he was the

butt of some joke he wasn’t getting. In truth, there was a lot about the Doctor and his friends that Gabe didn’t get and he wondered if it was something unusual about them or if life on this planet had

changed him. He hurried after Peri. They found the Doctor leading Kate through breathing exercises. He was now wearing a pair of

half-moon spectacles, which made him look reassuringly like an

old-time country doctor.

‘About time,’ the Doctor said, glancing at them over the top of

his spectacles. ‘Put the straw down and put the blankets over it, Peri. It won’t be long now.’

‘Her labour’s started?’ Gabe asked.

Kate managed a short laugh. ‘Not exactly,’ she said between

breaths. She nodded at her trousers which now had a spreading dark stain. ‘But my waters broke.’

While Gabe helped Kate get comfortable on the makeshift bed of

straw, the Doctor and Peri spoke quietly.

‘Now would be a good time for the hot water and towels, Peri.’

‘But you said –’

‘I said Hollywood had a lot to answer for. I didn’t say I wouldn’t need them.’

‘You can be really annoying at times, you know that?’

‘Oh, yes.’ The Doctor sounded quite cheerful.

‘When was the last time you delivered a baby?’ Peri asked. ‘You

have delivered one, I mean.’

‘Ummm...’ the Doctor said thoughtfully. ‘Eighteen-sixty-five.

But I do know what I’m doing.’

‘You’re the doctor, Doctor.’

The Doctor just grinned and Gabe wondered how he could be so

relaxed. There was something about the Doctor and his friends that seemed both completely at ease in the colony but also totally out of place. Maybe it was the flippant way they talked. Or maybe, Gabe

mused, Peri was right. He and all the other colonists had become

too insular. Too obsessed with what was happening on their own

homesteads to pay attention to the colony as a whole. That hadn’t been what they had talked about on the 18-month journey to this

planet. They had made such grand plans. So why had it taken three strangers to save Kate from giving birth outside in a blizzard?

Peri arrived back with an armful of worn-looking towels and a

large metal pitcher of warm water that she had scavenged from what she insisted was the most disgusting little kitchen she had ever seen.

A few minutes later, Erimem and her party returned. They were

painted white from the storm but she triumphantly handed a bag of medical supplies to the Doctor.

Kate drifted slowly into a peaceful doze and the night wore on.

More people arrived from the outer habitats. A few came with

livestock in tow, refusing to abandon their animals to the

conditions. At Erimem’s suggestion, Walter Cantrell was evicted

from his chosen room so that two horses and a cow could be put in there instead. Cantrell had objected but he had been shouted down.

People he had isolated, bullied and frightened over the previous

year now sat and talked. For the first time since the ship landed,

virtually the entire population was gathered and they were talking.

Some of the colonists had brought torches and lamps to see their

way through the blizzard. Peri eyed the lights thoughtfully and then looked at the central power core which still glowed a dull green.

She disappeared into the crowd with Erimem and a few moments

later they were collecting the lamps. The Doctor shrugged in

response to Gabe's puzzled expression. They watched the girls

moving around the power core, encouraging people to hang their

lamps and lanterns from it. It took a while before the effect became apparent but as more people saw what was happening, they moved

to join in, hanging lights, pieces of metal or anything they could find that was brightly coloured. Peri returned to the Doctor looking suitably pleased with herself.

'Do not ask me,' Erimem said. 'I have no idea what we just did.'

Peri glowered at her friend. 'Christmas isn't Christmas without a tree and, okay, so that's not exactly a tree but it isn't bad.' She looked proudly at the core. The flashes of bright emerald shooting through the darker green caught the lights and reflected off the

pieces of metal sending wildly coloured reflections around the

chamber. 'It's more like a melted glitter ball than a Christmas tree, isn't it?' Peri asked ruefully.

The Doctor smiled a wistful smile and suddenly looked far older

than he had seemed. Gabe wondered what he could be thinking

about to bring about such a change but then the mood passed and

the Doctor beamed at Peri. 'It's splendid. And it's distracted the people from the blizzard.'

'It has, hasn't it?' Peri was delighted.

'I must take you back to London during the War,' the Doctor said

thoughtfully. ‘You’d be a star in the shelters during the Blitz.’

‘Let me think about that for a minute,’ Peri said quickly. ‘No. No, thanks.’ Her lips pursed thoughtfully. ‘Something’s missing… we have the snow, we have the tree – kind of, but we’re missing…’ She 210

beamed suddenly. ‘Carols.’ She grabbed Erimem’s wrist and hauled

her back to the crowd.

‘When they’re like this I find it best to just leave them to it,’ the Doctor explained. After a few moments they heard Peri’s voice

singing softly.

‘Silent night, holy night.’

Other voices joined Peri’s, singing softly enough that they

wouldn’t waken Kate.

‘Christmas is out of fashion back on Earth,’ Gabe said quietly.

‘Not many people still celebrate it. Too many problems for people to think about celebrating anything.’

‘Perhaps surviving those problems is worth celebrating in itself,’

the Doctor answered. They heard a moan from inside the room.

‘Back to work.’

Kate’s labour progressed quickly. Her contractions moved closer

far more quickly than she had feared. A protracted labour was

something Gabe knew she dreaded. For some reason, she found the

carol singing helped her relax and, when the singing began to die down, the Doctor sent Gabe to encourage the singers to continue.

On the way, people he hadn’t seen in months stopped Gabe to wish

him well or send their love to Kate. He passed each message to Kate and they both drew strength from the unexpected affection being

shown by their fellow colonists.

‘You’re doing fine,’ the Doctor assured them. ‘It won’t be long

now.’ Half an hour later, the Doctor sent Gabe out again, this time to fetch Peri and Erimem. They returned, arguing quietly. ‘It’s just a song,’ Peri was saying.

‘I know,’ Erimem protested. ‘All I am saying is that Wenceslas is a very silly name for a king.’

Peri looked to the Doctor. ‘Gabe said Kate was close to time. I

guess it’s going to get ooky now.’

‘Ooky?’

‘You know,’ Peri explained. ‘Ooky. Icky.’

Erimem stared blankly at her friend. ‘There are times I do not

understand a word you say, Peri.’

‘Neither do I,’ the Doctor smiled cheerfully. ‘In answer to what I think was your question, yes, Kate is very close to time. Just

reassure her that everything’s going to be fine.’

‘You’re enjoying this, aren’t you?’ Peri asked.

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘Don’t play innocent, Doctor. You’re enjoying this. There are no

shape-shifting silver robots, no green Martians, no ancient evils from the dawn of time. It’s just you being a doctor for once and I 211

think you like it.’

‘Perhaps,’ the Doctor smirked. ‘And perhaps it’s balance. We

spend so much of our time dealing with the darker side of the

universe. Maybe we need to see the lighter side as well. Birth

instead of death.’

‘That’s very profound for this time of night.’

‘Isn’t it?’ the Doctor agreed.

Kate squeezed Gabe's hand hard and gasped as a contraction hit her. 'Doctor,' Gabe called. He had been listening to the Doctor's conversations with interest but the contraction focused his mind again.

Instantly, the Doctor's whimsical mood vanished and he was kneeling beside Kate. 'Not long now.'

Kate's labour lasted a further two and a half hours until just after one on Christmas morning, when the planet Alpha One heard a baby cry for the very first time. After examining both mother and infant, the Doctor pronounced them both absolutely fine. The colonists gathered in the plant breathed a collective sigh of relief.

The tension had built in the atmosphere as the night had worn on without word on Kate's condition. When word passed round the chamber, clapping and cheers broke out and someone began singing *The First Noel*.

An hour after the baby was born, Ana and Val were the first in what would be a long line of visitors to see the first baby born on this new world. Val handed a brightly coloured blanket to Kate.

'We usually have this on our bed but your little one could probably use it more.'

More colonists followed, each bringing a small gift for the newborn. In the hours since arriving in the plant, the matronly Cath Drake had managed to knit a jolly-looking teddy bear with a slightly wonky mouth, while Jacob Poison turned one of his cleanest socks into a dainty little hat. Two of the men who had abandoned Walter Cantrell earlier brought in a broad feeding trough they had liberated from a nearby barn and cleaned up. With straw and a blanket added, it made a perfectly serviceable crib. Nobody

stayed long but everybody wanted to see the baby. Gabe was

interested to see that the people weren't visiting in the family units they had retreated into over the past year. They came as groups of friends. Friendships born on the spaceship but pushed aside as the colonists battled their new home were being remembered.

The Doctor had noticed it too. 'It would be a shame if this

community spirit melted away with the snow,' he said quietly to

Gabe.

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Gabe nodded thoughtfully. He had scarcely taken his eyes from

the infant since she had been born. Her mother's mouth but

definitely his nose, the poor mite. 'We should have a naming

celebration for her.'

'Excellent idea,' the Doctor agreed. 'And might I suggest a

considerable number of other celebrations?'

'Is that a prescription, Doctor?' Gabe asked, tickling his

daughter's chin gently.

The Doctor grinned. 'A celebration to be held at least once every month. Other public meetings at least once a week. Keep the people meeting and keep them talking, that's the ticket. Work together. It's much easier than trying to do it all alone.'

Gabe nodded. He suddenly felt the exhaustion he had been

pushing against for hours. He lay down beside Kate and she

snuggled against his shoulder. When he woke a few hours later, Dr Leishman, the colony's medic was looking down at him.

'What on earth's been going on here?'

'The Doctor can explain.' Gabe looked around but there was no

sign of Peri, Erimem or the Doctor. They had gone as suddenly as

they had arrived.

Outside, the snow was still falling heavily as the Doctor and his companions headed back to the TARDIS.

‘But why did we have to leave?’ Erimem demanded, struggling to keep up with the Doctor.

‘We’ve done all we can here,’ the Doctor said briskly. ‘Their own doctor had arrived. And I found out where and when we are so we can move on.

‘Move on to the Christmas you promised me.’ Peri hurried to keep pace with the Doctor. ‘I promised to show Erimem a real Christmas, so Earth, twentieth century, snow and lots of stores.’

‘Real Christmas?’ The Doctor sounded bemused. ‘You’ve just had snow, a tree, carols and a baby born almost in a stable. How much more Christmassy do you want?’

‘I just want…’ Peri stopped, a little embarrassed. ‘I just want a Christmas like I had when I was a kid. You know. Warm and fun and safe with the people you want to be with.’

The Doctor stopped, surprised. ‘I hadn’t expected quite such a sentimental reason.’ There was no condemnation in his voice but Peri squirmed a little anyway.

‘If you can’t be sentimental at Christmas, when can you be? Besides –’ she looked off into the snow at the white-covered houses and trees ‘– everybody can do with being a little sentimental sometimes.’

A look Peri couldn’t begin to decipher flitted across the Doctor’s face and was then gone as he strode off for the TARDIS. ‘As you

wish.' The Doctor stopped in front of the police box and took his bearings for a moment before heading to a nearby tree. He

rummaged in the snow at the foot of the tree before fishing out a black box about the size of a large paperback. He brushed it free of snow then flipped a switch and dropped it into his pocket. Four

inquisitive eyes looked at him expectantly. 'What?' 'And I guess

you'll be explaining that box right now?' Peri asked.

'That?' The Doctor answered innocently. 'Oh, that's nothing.'

'Oh, that's okay, then, let's forget it.' Peri's stared at the Doctor sourly. 'Better yet, you could explain it.'

'Really, it's nothing.'

Peri snorted. 'It may be Christmas but we're not buying that

baloney.'

'It's nothing,' the Doctor flustered. 'Nothing at all.'

'So why won't you explain it?' Erimem asked reasonably.

'Well, it's, well...' The Doctor's shoulders slumped. 'You're

going to nag me until I do tell you, aren't you?'

'Yes, she is,' Erimem said sweetly. 'And so am I.'

'He's up to something,' Peri said.

Erimem nodded. 'I know. You can see it in his face.'

Peri looked up. The snow had almost stopped and the clouds were

beginning to break. 'The change in weather wouldn't have anything to do with that box, would it?'

'Oh, all right,' the Doctor conceded. 'This cloak-and-dagger stuff was never my strong suit. But if the Time Lords ask, we were never here, all right?'

'If you say so,' Peri agreed quickly. Now spill the beans.'

'Yes,' Erimem noted the phrase for future use. 'Spill the beans.'

The Doctor fished in his pocket for the TARDIS key. ‘Oh, very well,’ he conceded. ‘Let me tell you a story for Christmas. You can’t get much more traditional than that. Once upon a time some colonists moved to a planet and they worked hard. Over the space of some years, the planet prospered and the colony grew.’ The Doctor stopped and looked to the sky. Patches of blue were beginning to show through the breaking cloud. ‘Now, this planet was important. Of course the colonists didn’t know that. How could they? You see, a war was coming. A bad one. A terrible war, and this world was a nexus. The war would hinge on whether this planet was run by people serving themselves or by good people prepared to protect their community and the other worlds around them.’

‘This making any sense to you, Erimem?’

‘No.’

‘Good. Glad it’s not just me.’

The Doctor shuffled his feet uncomfortably in the snow. ‘There’s nothing like a baby being born to bring a community together.’ The lights in the windows of the houses in town flickered into life and a shaft of weak sunlight appeared through the clouds. ‘As long as they were gathered in the one place, everything would be fine. And so, well, if someone arranged for the weather to be terrible and for the baby to be born in the middle of it... and for the right people to be here to help them on their way.’ He stopped sheepishly. ‘I did say this cloak-and-dagger stuff really wasn’t me at all.’

‘So you arranged it all?’ Pen glanced at the sky. Only a few wispy clouds remained. ‘Even the storm.’

‘Just making sure history stays on course,’ the Doctor replied.

‘Unless my people ask. They get very touchy about this kind of

thing. If they found out what I’ve just done, I’d be on trial again in no time. Once they’ve spent a century or two discussing it in

committees of course.’

‘You saved the universe by delivering a baby?’ Peri interrupted.

‘So it would seem, Peri.’

Peri shrugged. ‘Just one thing, Doctor...’

‘Yes?’

A snowball slammed against the Doctor’s shoulder. ‘Merry

Christmas!

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All Snug in Their Beds

Scott Alan Woodard

An Adventure of the Fourth Doctor, with Romana and K-9

‘Twas the night before Christmas and all through colony pod D/61–

A not a creature was stirring, not even a... Well, actually, that’s not entirely true, as will soon become clear. For a start, it wasn’t

technically the night before Christmas – although as you’ll see, with a little poetic license we can probably get away with that. Secondly, a few creatures were stirring, even though they had no right to be, within the frigid atmosphere of the spacecraft.

However, we’re getting a little ahead of ourselves. As we’ve said, colony pod D/61–A, otherwise known as the Karsudan, was about

to experience a not-so-silent night.

A security camera, mounted on an icicle-encrusted wall, whirred

and clicked as it tracked a squat, boxy metallic construct that was unexpectedly gliding across the frost-dusted floor. The machine

trundled to the right, halting in front of a bank of similarly frozen

controls. The microprocessor behind the camera paused in confusion as it focused its lens on a small rectangle of crimson light projected from a grid at the head of the object.

An aerial, tipped with a tiny suction cup, extended from the centre of the grid and brushed a plastic dome on the console. Instantly the room was aglow and K-9 was bathed in pale, cerulean light.

Romana stepped out of the TARDIS into the watery blue light of the colony pod's flight deck, bitter cold instantly stinging her cheeks. 'Localised-environmental systems reactivated, Master,' K-9 chirruped from the floor.

'Oh, well done, K-9!' said a muffled voice. Romana glanced back to see the Doctor stepping out of the TARDIS, only his twinkling eyes visible above his scarf, which was wound tight against the cold. He squatted and patted the robot's oblong head. 'Good dog.'

'Doctor, it's positively freezing in here.' Romana sighed, casting her eyes round the frost-covered interior of the Karsudan's flight 216 deck.

'That's all right,' the Doctor said cheerfully. 'You're dressed for it.'

Hands on hips, Romana appraised her outfit: the accoutrements of a member of the Royal Flying Corps: knee-length leather jacket, flying hat, goggles, gloves and a magnificent white, silk scarf.

'The current mean temperature is minus 83 degrees centigrade, Mistress,' K-9 reported helpfully.

'Chin up, Romana,' said the Doctor. 'The heating units have been

reactivated, haven't they, K-9?'

'Affirmative.'

'It will soon be as toasty as the Ice Canyons of Karabathura.'

'It'll be shirt sleeves, then.' She pursed her lips in thought.

'Perhaps I'll go and change.'

The Doctor pulled his scarf down and smiled up at his

companion, his teeth reflecting the flickering, emergency lights

above. Suddenly the ship lurched and a booming explosion

shattered the stillness.

'What was that?' Romana shouted, clutching an overhead pipe to

prevent her from tumbling into a heap on top of K-9.

'Let's find out, shall we?' The Doctor, seemingly unaffected by

the ship's sudden movement, leapt over K-9, dropped into a padded chair and began fiddling with the controls. 'First we deactivate that distress signal.' He tapped out a series of numbers on a keypad and a grid of flickering symbols on the heads-up display went dark.

'Then we open these screens to see what's causing all this ruckus.'

Deep within the walls of the command dome, pistons hissed and

shifted and, above, thick protective plates slowly retracted from the multi-faceted windows to unveil the eternal night. Roman's eyes

went wide as the forward panels fell away revealing a vast, white, nebulous mass before them. 'Oh,' she said. 'Doctor, is that what I think it is?'

The Doctor nodded. 'Ice cloud. Most likely the result of a mid-

space collision between two comets.' Her companion focused the

Karsudan's scanners on the strange mass and the readings scrolled across the monitor almost immediately. 'Yes, two distinct

concentrations of water vapour and debris. Odds of a collision like

that occurring in the vastness of deep space are... well...' His voice trailed off in thought.

Romana placed her hands on the Doctor's shoulders and leaned in

from behind the chair. 'Around four million to one, I'd say.'

'Four-million, two-hundred and fifty-seven thousand to one, to be precise, Mistress,' K-9 whined smugly, oblivious to the smarty-pants look Romana shot at him.

'That low, eh?'

A few more deep booms echoed throughout the flight deck as

large chunks of ice and rock smashed into the hull of the Karsudan.

Romana leaned forward and examined the readings herself. 'Do

correct me if I'm wrong, Doctor, but isn't our current course

leading us straight into the heart of that cloud?'

'Straight into that cloud? Do you think I'd be sitting here if we were drifting straight into the cloud?' He paused for a second.

'Unless, of course...'

The Doctor checked the numbers scrolling across the screen once

again, performing a few dozen complex calculations on the fingers of his left hand. He removed his hat and ruffled his hair.

'Romana, our current course is leading us straight into the heart of that cloud. That's not very good, is it? We'll probably be

smashed to pieces.'

Romana sighed, straightened and folded her leather-clad arms

across her chest. Ever since her regeneration, she'd found the

Doctor's whims and fancies slightly less irritating. However, at

times like this, he could test the patience of an Osiran. 'And just what are we going to do about our imminent destruction?' she

asked.

‘Oh, a slight course adjustment to get this ship out of harm’s way, then we slip away, unnoticed.’ The Doctor smirked. ‘Our modus

operandi.’

Romana tried to suppress her own smile. There was no point

letting him think that she was impressed. He’d be unbearable then.

‘Very well,’ she said, plunging her hands into her jacket’s

pockets. ‘Have you checked on the cryogenic chamber yet?’

Romana, I only have one pair of hands, you know. K-9, I have

only got one pair of hands, haven’t I?’

‘Affirmative, Master.’

‘Okay then,’ said Romana, ‘why don’t I leave you, your one pair

of hands and K-9 to get more of these systems back online while I pop down and see if our passengers are still tucked up?’

‘Exactly what I was going to suggest.’ The Doctor beamed at her.

With a knowing look, Romana turned on her heels and sashayed out

of the control dome, exiting via a round door that irised open and closed behind her with a gaseous hiss.

They watched the girl leave. The tall, strange man was muttering

something to the equally strange machine that sat obediently at his booted feet. He wasn’t supposed to be there. They knew that, of

course. And he definitely wasn’t supposed to be touching those

controls but, for now, they decided to lurk in the shadows a little 218

longer. After all, they’d always been told never to talk to strangers.

In the corridor just outside the flight deck, Romana paused before a large, flat panel display and, with a swipe of her fingertips, the screen illuminated revealing a detailed schematic of the Karsudan.

‘Cryogenics, please?’

A glowing, green line sprouted from a helpfully cheerful label

that said ‘You Are Here’ and wormed its way across the map

terminating with a series of animated, concentric circles in an aft section of the ship.

‘Not too far to go, then,’ Romana muttered to herself and,

switching the diagram off, started on her way. Of course, by now, after all this adventuring with the Doctor she should have trusted her gut feeling that she was being watched, but the rational side of her brain insisted that there was nothing to fear in the corridor.

Suddenly, the rational side of her mind shut itself up when

absolutely nothing growled behind her. Slowly, Romana turned to

look straight into the eyes of a something. The something looked

straight back at her.

They were just about to make their move. They’d watched him long

enough, sprinting back and forth, flicking switches, punching

screens, talking to the robot. The little machine followed him this way and that, as if it were trying to assist. For a time they had been transfixed by this energetic whirl of activity, mesmerised by this stranger who seemed to positively crackle with energy. It had been so long since there had been any movement in this place. Then, just when they’d summoned up the courage to step forward, a muffled

shriek pierced the air. The stranger spun, almost tripping over the obscenely long, colourful stripe of material wound round his neck.

‘Romana?’ he shouted, bolting from the room, before shouting

over his shoulder, ‘Wait here, K-9!’

They stepped back into the shadows and awaited his return.

‘Oh, yes, very funny,’ Romana said as the Doctor stood in the

doorway, guffawing. She was pinned to the floor by a hairy, though

clearly affectionate creature. Now would you mind lifting this beast off me before it licks away my epidermis?'

'Heel!' the Doctor barked. The creature turned and, much to

Roman's surprise, rushed to the Time Lord's side. He crouched and scratched the animal's head. 'Well, aren't you a delight? I haven't seen anything like you for centuries.' The mammal squinted,

wagged its long tail, and purred.

Romana stood and dusted herself off. 'You recognise it, then?'

'Who wouldn't? Romana, you've just been slobbered on by a

ratherfine specimen of the fortieth century's genetically engineered pet of choice. I believe they called them cogs: half cat, half dog.'

'So, they're fiercely loyal, but prone to long naps?' Romana said drily.

'The perfect mix! This one must have been in self-induced

hibernation until K-9 reactivated the environmental systems.' The Doctor dug into his deep pockets. 'I'm sure I have some kibble in here somewhere.'

'Or would it prefer a saucer of milk?'

The cog returned to Romana and rubbed its head affectionately

against her leg.

'Looks as though you've made a new chum. Don't let K-9 see

you. He'll be terribly upset'

Romana sighed, shaking her head.

'Right, I'm going to go back and save us from icy oblivion.

Haven't you checked those cryogenic pods yet?' He held up his

sonic screwdriver and gave it an experimental buzz. 'They won't

check themselves, you know.'

The stranger had come back, which pleased them no end. They liked him. They watched as he manipulated a small device in his palm, scrolling through layers of computer files on the main flight-deck screen. They couldn't be sure but it looked as if he was scanning all the way back to the launch of the pod some three hundred years previously.

'Ah! As I thought,' he announced to the squat machine that obediently spun at the sound of his deep, velvety voice. 'It looks as though the bulk of the colony swarm was pillaged by space pirates about seven years after departure from Earth. Think of it, K-9. All those dormant pods moving as one. All under the command of one central navigation node. They were sitting anatidae! Automatic emergency protocols were activated and the engines fired, but no one awoke from their icy slumber. The ship must have tumbled light years off-course, the armada scattering amongst the stars.' A slight rotation of the palmed device and another data folder peeled open revealing pages upon pages of mission data. 'Ah-ha!'

K-9 glided towards the man, pausing beside his master.

'Look there! They were bound for Gliese 581d!'

'My records indicate that at the time of their departure, this planet was more commonly referred to as Earth Two Point Seven ,' K-9 announced.

They watched as the stranger brought up a familiar three-dimensional animated rendering of an alien world. How many times had they gazed at that very same hologram in wonder and hope?

The man seemed to be as impressed as they had once been.

'She's a Super-Earth. No wonder all the entries on the log seem

so excited. Its all here, K-9: flight plans checked in triplicate, authorised trajectory, projected arrival at destination. A top-of-the-line planet with all mod cons. They must have thought all their

Christmases had come at –'

The stranger fell silent, lost in the reports. They watched as he rubbed his open palm thoughtfully across his mouth.

'Master?' K-9 prompted.

'Oh, it's nothing K-9. I've just noticed the date they had

programmed to arrive: 25 December, classical calendar. The poor

dears. They've overslept on Christmas morning by more than three

hundred years. That's enough to make a grown Time Lord weep.'

After several wrong turns, Romana and the cog finally arrived at the airlock leading into the cryogenic chamber. She attempted to peer through the tiny window into the mysterious hall beyond, but a

thick coat of frost obscured her vision. To their right, a small yellow and black notice read: 'In case of emergency.' Without hesitation, Romana pulled at the indicated control lever. The environmental

door before them shot upwards into the ceiling, allowing them

access to the chamber beyond.

Inside, it was quiet and rather peaceful in the large room. Rows

upon rows of sleep capsules radiated away from the doorway like

the spokes of a great wheel. Occasionally, a faint hiss of escaping carbon dioxide emitted from the life-support systems of the

slumbering colonists, breaking the tomblike stillness within the vast chamber.

Slowly, Romana moved among the capsules, occasionally

glancing down through viewports at their sleeping human

occupants. She noted how many of the sleepers exhibited subtle

smiles and she sensed their collective hope for a better future, far away from an over-populated and over-polluted planet Earth.

Unfortunately, not all were able to express that sense of hope, for a sparkling atmospheric barrier now sealed off a damaged section of the chamber.

On the other side of this shield, Romana saw that an enormous

section of wall was now missing and a field of stars could be

observed beyond. Beneath the massive scar, several cryogenic

capsules lay damaged or destroyed, buried beneath rubble and ice.

'I wonder how long ago that impact occurred?' Romana said

aloud.

The cog grumbled and looked up at the Time Lady.

'Fortunately the ship's emergency systems isolated the damage

and obviously you were spared.' Romana stopped. 'The Doctor

theorised that you were hibernating, but surely if that were true, shouldn't you be ravenous?' She bent down and ran her hand along

the cog's muscular body. 'Your coat is thick and healthy, and I'd go so far as to say that you're a tad overweight, but how is that

possible, unless –' Roman's voice trailed off as she noticed the two cryo-capsules nearest to them. The seals were broken and the beds inside devoid of their occupants.

She looked from the vacant capsules to the cog. The creature

squinted, growled and leaned back, poised to attack.

The machine the stranger called K-9 had trundled away, on some

errand for his master, and they decided it was time to make their move. The stranger was alone now. They could hear the device he'd been using on the underside of the control console, its low whirring buzz almost disguised by his own off-tone whistling. The tune

brought back memories of the family huddled around the holovision, interacting with repeats of old comedies, and exchanging presents beneath the recyclable, SynthitreeTm. It was something about shepherds washing their socks by night.

The tune stopped at the sound of the melting ice crunching beneath their fret. They halted.

'K-9?' the stranger called out. 'Back already? Surely that retro array takes longer to align than...' He swung himself out of the access panel, but it was too late; they were right on top of him.

His face registered surprise before splitting into a dazzling smile.

'Hello, there.'

Romana pounded down the corridor, running from dark to light in repeating pattern beneath the line of emergency lights studding the ceiling. Frantically, she glanced behind, before throwing her scarf back over her shoulder, looking forward and redoubling her efforts.

Coming up fast behind her was the cog, claws skittering on the metal floor plates as it ran after her, saliva-glistening teeth bared and growling menacingly.

'I'm the Doctor, and who might you be?'

The girl cocked her head to one side and spoke first: 'My name is Alpharetta.' Her voice was delicate and cultured. 'I'm seven.'

The Doctor was suitably impressed. 'Are you now?'

'I'm Bertram,' said the boy, stepping into the Doctor's line of sight. 'And I'm eight,' he declared proudly.

Alpharetta looked over at Bertram and stuck her tongue out, pulling the teddy bear she clutched in her small hands to her chest.

They were both dressed in identical pyjamas and dressing gowns.

‘Well, I am delighted to meet you both.’ The Doctor crouched before the two children and withdrew a small, crumpled paper bag from his pocket. He pulled it open and offered its contents to the children. ‘Would you care for a jelly –’

At that moment, the main door pivoted open and K-9 trundled in, nose blaster extended and primed.

‘Down, K-9! Down, boy! You don’t want to shoot Alpharetta and Bertram, do you?’

Bertram approached. ‘Is it a cog, Doctor?’ he asked, reaching out to touch the machine.

Alpharetta moved in step with Bertram. ‘Or is it just a plain old dog?’ she wondered.

‘He’s neither here nor there, actually. He’s a robot and he’s my best friend, aren’t you, K-9?’

‘Affirmative, Master.’ K-9 wagged his tail antenna and rotated his head-mounted tracking sensors as Bertram ran his tiny fingers over the multicolored keypad located in the small of the robot’s steel-gray back. He smiled delightedly.

‘Can he do any tricks?’ Bertram asked.

K-9 spoke for himself. ‘I can conduct extensive repairs to any spacecraft in the known galaxies or pilot the TARDIS unaided through the time vortex.’

Alpharetta looked deep into K-9’s visual sensors. ‘But can you fetch a ball?’ She looked back at the Doctor with wide, ice blue

eyes. ‘Can he sit up and beg?’

‘Oh, I suppose you could, couldn’t you, K-9?’ the Doctor asked.

‘I see no practical value in these behaviours, Master,’ K-9 stated.

Suddenly the door twisted open once again and Romana rushed through, breathless. ‘Doctor! It’s after me!’ she cried.

‘After you? What’s after you?’ The Doctor looked up the corridor. The cog was charging towards them, its wide eyes and slavering jaws visible as it passed through each beam of emergency lighting projected from above. ‘K-9! Re-arm that stun-beam of yours!’ he shouted. ‘And don’t fire till you see the yellow of its eyes!’

Suddenly Romana was standing between K-9 and the oncoming cog. ‘No, wait, K-9! Hold your fire!’ she suddenly ordered.

The Doctor looked from the Romana, to the door and back again. Well, make your mind up.’

‘Mistress?’ questioned K-9.

Romana turned as the gap quickly closed between her and the creature, but the cog lowered its head and rushed straight past the Time Lady into the control room. The Doctor jumped backwards as

a flash of grey streaked beneath his booted feet, and jumped again as the cog pounced forward. There was a terminal squeak as the cog brought its claws down onto a small, fuzzy rodent.

‘Not even a mouse,’ the Doctor mused to himself.

‘I spied it zigzagging along the corridor in front of the cog just as K-9 was preparing his blaster!’

Bertram and Alpharetta ran forward with delighted grins lighting up their faces, pointing into the corner. ‘Look!’ they squealed

excitedly.

‘And there goes another,’ observed the Doctor. They all watched as the little creature squeezed itself through a tiny gap in an access panel and vanished. The Doctor kneeled and yanked the panel from its frame. His eyes went wide as a swarm of mice spilled out onto the floor, then scattered in all directions. ‘We’ve got ourselves an infestation!’

The cog, spying the flurry of tiny creatures, turned away from its catch and pursued some more of the animals back down the corridor from where it had originally come.

‘That certainly explains why so many of the ship’s systems are unresponsive.’

‘And how our four-legged friend has managed to survive and thrive on his own,’ Romana concluded.

‘I was wondering what happened to my pet mice!’ said Bertram.

Romana slowly turned, noticing the two children for the first time. She sighed. ‘And you are?’

The Doctor cleared his throat. ‘Alpharetta. Bertram. Allow me to introduce Romanadvoratrelundar.’

Alpharetta approached the Time Lady and extended her hand. Her round little face was creased in thought. ‘Your name is very cumbersome. May I call you Fred instead?’ she asked.

‘It’s Romana, if you’d please.’ They shook hands.

‘Well, I prefer Fred,’ Bertram commented.

The Doctor laughed. ‘My thoughts exactly!’

‘So what are the three of you doing on our spaceship?’ asked Alpharetta.

The Doctor thought for a moment, and then snapped his fingers.

‘Intergalactic Rescue!’ He fished a business card from his pocket and flashed it in the children’s direction. ‘We’re here to fix your pod.’

‘“Intergalactic Rescue?” I don’t believe you,’ said Bertram.

Romana stepped up. ‘We intercepted your distress beacon,

bypassed our randomiser and reset the coordinates to materialise –’

she rapped on the side of the TARDIS, and then continued ‘– right 224

here!’

Alpharetta examined the police box. ‘Then this is your

spaceship?’ ‘Yes,’ said the Doctor.

‘But it’s made of wood.’

‘Actually, the shell is nothing more than a physical manifestation of an elaborate mathematical algorithm,’ Romana replied.

Bertram screwed up his face. ‘It’s a magic box, then?’

‘If you like,’ said Romana.

The Doctor tweaked Bertram’s nose. ‘And what about the two of

you? What are you doing up and about?’

‘A few days ago, I dreamt of an explosion,’ Bertram said. ‘It was brilliant!’

‘And then we woke up,’ Alpharetta added.

Romana filled in the gaps for the Doctor, explaining the massive

hull damage in the cryogenic chamber.

Suddenly the ship lurched and a shower of sparks rained down

from above, startling the children.

‘Doctor, this ship barely survived one massive impact. I doubt it could handle another one of similar magnitude!’

The Doctor activated his sonic screwdriver and unlocked a small wall-mounted box beneath which sat a large button. ‘I believe the appropriate phrase is “red alert”!’ He pressed the button and all hell broke loose.

Alpharetta and Bertram settled down onto a nearby settee and watched as the Doctor and Romana sprang into action, strapping themselves into chairs designated for the pilot and co-pilot.

‘K-9, access the Karsudan’s system profile. I need to know the extent of the damage caused by those rodents.’

K-9 extended his data-com probe and quickly synched with the pod’s internal network.

‘Main engines are offline!’ Romana shouted.

The Doctor checked the readings. ‘Yes, I know, but what about the parallel systems?’

‘They’re out too!’

‘Analysis complete,’ announced K-9, withdrawing his sensor from the access point. ‘The rodentia have damaged several power generation apparatus beyond repair.’

‘K-9’s right.’ Romana double-checked her findings. ‘We simply don’t have enough time to restore the energy converters, Doctor.’

She withdrew her hands from the controls, defeated. ‘The Karsudan is finished.’

Behind, Bertram sat, quietly playing with a Holo-Game console. Suddenly the ghostly display dimmed and flickered out. He

smacked the side of the device. ‘Rats, I forgot to change the

batteries!' He tossed the game console across the room in

frustration.

Before it met the floor, the Doctor intercepted it in mid-air. 'Be a shame to damage it,' he said. 'I have an HG-18 in the TARDIS, with the optional emotional feedback package.'

'Eighteen?' Bertram wondered. 'But that's the HG-2. The HG-3

was about to come out just before we left Earth. I so wanted one for Christmas.'

'Did I fail to mention that we're time travellers?'

Another violent impact shook the ship.

'Doctor, I think it's high time you were telling us all your

incredibly clever plan for saving our lives!' Romana pleaded.

The Doctor spun in his chair and held up the gaming device,

shaking it in his palm. 'Romana, have you ever played *Gamma*

Authority 3?'

Romana arched her eyebrows in disbelief. 'I can't say that I have, Doctor! This is hardly the right time for –'

'It's a very good game, isn't it, Bertram?'

'Oh, yes! My second favorite!' Bertram replied.

'On the sixteenth level, the Aglakian Marauders bombard your

Shaft-Fighter with Garber Radiation.'

'Garber Radiation?' Romana asked. 'Surely there's no such

thing...'

'No imagination,' said the Doctor, shaking his head slightly.

'You're right, of course, Romana. The fictional radiation is named after the game's lead programmer. Regardless, the only way to save your ship and advance to the next level is...'

Bertram and Alpharetta were now flanking the Doctor and Romana. ‘You have to reconfigure your engines and use the radiation for fuel,’ said the boy.

‘Precisely!’ The Doctor punched a button on the console and a glittering panel materialised before Romana that read ‘Emergency ram scoop activation.’

‘The Karsudan is equipped with ram scoops!’ Romana stated, surprised.

‘Yes! Plenty of exploitable volatile matter floating about out there amongst all that hydrogen-rich ice and debris!’

Alpharetta moved away, opened a small hatch and withdrew a datapad. She walked back and offered it to the Doctor. ‘Will this help?’ she asked.

The Doctor read the plastic slipcase. ‘Colony Pod Interactive Operator’s Manual.’ He tossed the device over his shoulder where it landed with a loud clatter. ‘No need for that.’ He turned to his companion. ‘Romana!’

She pressed the large, red start button.

Outside, two enormous panels to either side of the Karsudan’s control dome slid back revealing umbrella-like arrays, which sprouted from the ports like glowing poinsettia bracts. Almost immediately, the arrays began drawing in the space debris and ice.

Back inside, once darkened panels and control systems illuminated with the sudden influx of energy being fed directly into the appropriate zones. The ship was returning to life.

‘Smell that?’ The Doctor sniffed. ‘Fission converters. Impressive for this century!’ He monitored the build-up in the engines and once the status lights shifted from red to green, he activated the thrusters quickly shifting the ship away from the ice cloud and out of harm’s way.

‘Are we going to die, Doctor?’ Bertram asked.

‘Of course not! You are a morbid little boy, aren’t you?’ The

Doctor reprogrammed the original destination into the navigation

system. ‘Well, I’ll be…’ he said with a laugh.

‘Is there a problem?’ Romana asked.

‘Not at all.’ The Doctor resealed the overhead blast shields,

which grumbled back into position until they met with an echoing

thump. ‘I’ve reset the Karsudan’s original course and, according to the chronometer, she’ll enter the orbit of Gliese 581d on 25

December.’ He smiled at the children.

‘We won’t have missed Christmas after all!’ Alpharetta

announced, leaping for joy.

The Doctor stood and squashed his hat onto his head, pushing it

down firmly and grinning. ‘Shall we?’

‘Leaving so soon?’ Romana asked.

‘No, not just yet.’ He moved towards the TARDIS. ‘K-9, any

idea where I put the tinsel?’

The Doctor stepped down off a cargo container having just placed a star atop the lush Itraquian Forevergreen. He wiped his hands on his scarf, and then stepped back to admire his handiwork.

‘Oh, it looks magnificent!’ Alpharetta and Bertram said in

unison. The cog, looking well fed, entered the room and sat near the Doctor.

‘What a good boy you are.’ The Time Lord reached out and scratched the beast behind its ears.

‘Master.’ K-9 approached, then stopped and slowly lowered his head.

‘You’re not jealous, are you, K-9?’

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The robotic dog remained silent.

‘Good grief, you are!

K-9 rotated away from the Doctor, ever so slightly.

‘K-9, you are my best friend and you must never forget that, understood?’

The robot spun around, raised his head and approached.

‘Affirmative, Master!’

‘Now, it’s time you two were back in bed.’

Bertram and Alpharetta grumbled their disappointment.

‘Not another word.’ Romana stretched her arm out in the direction of the exit. ‘Bed,’ she said firmly, but smiling all the same.

The two children groaned reluctantly and began shuffling across the bay.

In the cryo-chamber, the Doctor and Romana helped Bertram and Alpharetta back into their capsules.

‘Will you be here when we wake?’ asked Bertram.

‘Oh, I shouldn’t think so. When you next open your eyes, we’ll be long gone.’

‘Well, it’s been very nice meeting you both,’ said Alpharetta,

yawning slightly.

Romana brought the blankets up under Alpharetta's chin and

grinned at the young girl. 'It's been nice meeting you as well. And just think, your parents will be awake next time you're up and

about. Just don't wake them too early on Christmas morning.'

Alpharetta considered this sagely. 'Yes. I think I've missed

Mummy very much.'

'And so you should,' said the Doctor. 'Oh, I almost forgot!' The

Doctor reached into his coat, withdrew a small, silver, handheld

device and handed it to the young boy. 'Merry Christmas.'

'The HG-18! Wow!' Bertram took it in his hands.

'By the time you reach your new home, they'll be all the rage

back on Old Earth. Plus, I made a few modifications to this one. It'll never need a recharge.'

'Thank you, Doctor.'

The Doctor tucked Bertram in and ruffled his hair, just as

Romana handed Alpharetta a brand new teddy bear with a white

silk bow wrapped round his neck. She snuggled into the bear as

Romana stepped back, resealed the little girl's capsule and activated the freezing process.

The Doctor did the same to Bertram's capsule. He smiled.

'Goodnight, children. Sleep well.'

The Doctor and Romana watched as the little boy and girl gave

into the influence of the stasis field, slowly shutting their tired eyes

and slipping off into a deep slumber.

The two companions turned and snipped from the darkened,

silent cryogenic chamber. The cog sat obediently by the children's pods, head cocked to one side as it watched the door.

Seconds later, the Doctor mid Romana tip-toed back into the

chamber, both heavily laden with brightly gift-wrapped boxes and

packages. They went through the chamber, leaving a couple of

parcels at the foot of each pod.

Their work complete, the Doctor beckoned to the cog, and they

moved towards the door. The Doctor turned before he left and

grinned widely.

'Merry Christmas, my dears,' he whispered.

The Doctor and Romana returned to the flight deck, the cog

bounding into the room ahead of them.

'I still don't quite understand how the cog managed to survive for all that time on its own. Is our furry friend here really over three hundred years old?' Romana wondered.

'Oh, I suspect he's been augmented with perpetuity glands.

Probably several more healthy centuries ahead of him.' The Doctor patted the creature's head.

The cog suddenly caught sight of a passing rodent, meow-barked,

and rushed off in quick pursuit.

'Provided he's well fed and gets plenty of exercise!' The Doctor

laughed, and then called out to his mechanical friend. 'Come along, K-9. Time we were going.'

K-9 finished rerouting power to the tree and the glitter-encrusted star and matching strings of fairy lights illuminated, casting an undulating, yellowish glow around the flight deck. He withdrew his probe, and then followed the Doctor and Romana into the police

box.

The Doctor's voice echoed back into the flight deck. 'Twas the

night before Christmas, when all through the house, not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse –'

With a rush of inter-dimensional wind, the TARDIS dematerialised

from the realm of the physical, leaving behind a quiet spacecraft with a bright future. And from a tiny grille mounted in the central control panel at the front of the command dome there emitted a faint ringing tone buried in a sea of static: the distant yet unmistakable carrier signal of another Earth colony pod, carrying yet more

children all snug in their beds...

Decorative Purposes

Eddie Robson

An Adventure of the Eighth Doctor, with Lucie

I met the guy who made them, you know. I was there when it

happened. Well, he didn't actually *make* them, but they wouldn't be there if it wasn't for him.

It was back when I was working on the *Excelsior*. I was running for my life at the time. Something had gone wrong with the gravity, which was making it harder and harder to run, especially in my

work shoes, which were in no sense designed for running. I

remember opening the next door, jumping from foot to foot whilst I waited for it to slide up, then I pelted through and straight into a man carrying some pieces of electrical equipment. He fell to the

floor and dropped it all.

‘Sorry,’ I said, though the more pertinent question was what he

was doing there and why he wasn’t trying to get away.

‘That’s all right, that’s all right,’ he said, picking up his pieces.

He had longish wavy hair and friendly, relaxed eyes and he wore a white shirt. I recognised him: I’d served him in the restaurant two nights before. He left a very good tip.

‘You shouldn’t be here,’ I said.

‘No, you’re right,’ he replied, picking up the last of the

components and standing up straight. He wasn’t that tall. ‘I should be about two hundred metres that way, patching all this gubbins into the retros to see if I can force a course correction.’

The ship made a deeply disquieting noise as its engines strained

under unorthodox piloting. While I waited for the noise to die

down, I took in what the man had just said. ‘Can you do that?’

‘Hypothetically, Sabine, yes, I can.’

‘How do you know my name?’

He pointed at my uniform – specifically, at the patch which read

‘Hello, My Name is Sabine’. I felt like an idiot.

‘Come on, let’s move,’ he said. ‘We don’t have much time. In

fact, I’m afraid we may not have enough.’ He jogged away in the

other direction, gesturing for me to follow.

‘So who are you?’ I asked.

‘The Doctor. Pleased to meet you again. I apologise for meddling

with your super new cruise liner like this, but I’m concerned it’s going to crash into – well, at best a moon or a planet, and at worst the nearest star.’

‘Wow. No, you go ahead, then.’ I stopped and thought for a

second. ‘Unless of course you’re in league with the hijackers, in which case I should probably stop you, surely.’

‘If that were the case, then you should. But it isn’t.’

I believed him. Or at any rate, I thought I might as well. He

wasn’t trying to kill me, which the others certainly were. ‘What do they want?’ I asked whilst we were stopped, waiting for another

door to slide open.

‘You know there’s a VIP on board?’

‘Of course. Ambassador Otlin.’ We’d all been made well aware

of the ambassador’s presence. Draconians are very particular about protocol, and we’d had a lengthy dos and don’ts class before he

came aboard.

‘It seems your hijackers were planning to engineer an “accident”

for him, and for that matter, you and me and everyone else on the ship.’

‘So why are they still here? Won’t they die too?’

‘I’m sure they intended to be off the ship by now, but I’ve

managed to delay them. Or some of them, at least. How many are

still here?’

‘Not sure. They’re holding hostages upstairs.’

‘Demanding to know the location of the ambassador, I expect.

Well, he’s long gone.’

‘And we’re stuck here on a crash course with the bad guys?

Thanks, Ambassador.’

‘Oh, I think we can do better than making sure they share our

fate.'

'Can you really do it? I think all the engineering team are... er, dead, so you might be our only chance.'

'Yes,' he said. 'I may very well be.' We came to a stop. The

Doctor put his pieces down on the floor, caught his breath, then

added: 'Although not your only chance. There are still escape pods there, there and there.' He gestured at the wall. 'I assume that's why you were heading this way?' I nodded, feeling slightly ashamed. As if I could have saved the ship like he was trying to do, if I'd only put the effort in.

'Very wise,' he said, crouching down and sorting through the

equipment he brought. 'I promise I'll come back and pick you up if I sort things out up here, but I shouldn't bank on it if I were you. I don't want to worry you too much; in fact, past form suggests I

should be able to do it, but...' He looked up at me. 'I occasionally worry that I ride my luck a little too often.'

Will there be a pod left for you?' I asked.

'If nobody else needs one. And if I don't leave it to the very last second.'

'Isn't there anything I can do to help?'

'I don't –' he began. He stood and peered up at my hair, then

plucked a hairpin from it. 'Thank you,' he said. 'But now you really ought to go.' The engines made that noise again, and suddenly I

didn't need any extra encouragement. I hopped into the escape pod, activated it and 15 seconds later I was pulling away from the ship.

Through the tiny window, I could still see the Doctor working. He stopped to give me a wave, and I remember thinking how awful it

would be if the two seconds he spent doing that were all that cost him his chance to save the ship. The pod asked me if it was okay to go into stasis – I said yes and got myself...

... comfortable for the journey.

With a start, I realised that the journey was already over. There was daylight at the window: the hatch was opening. For a second I was worried that the atmosphere outside wouldn't be okay, but then I realised that the pod wouldn't have woken me up if it wasn't. It wouldn't even have landed here. So everything had to be fine.

I took some deep breaths.

We all got trained for stasis before we joined the ship and I'd

gone through it with the passengers countless times during the

welcome drills, but the problem is that the experience is over before you get a chance to remember your training. The important thing

isn't where you are, but when it is. For all I knew I could have been floating for three million years. I realised this, and hoped I hadn't.

I checked the chronometer and it told me I'd been out for just

over five days, which wasn't so bad. However, there was an

irritating fault in the navigation system that meant I had no idea where I was or what I should do now that I was there – I couldn't find maps of the place or anything. So that was useful. I found the emergency supplies bag and checked the contents, feeling like I

should be in the passenger lounge enacting all this for an audience.

I'd shown them the emergency basics so many times –I asked why

it couldn't be pre-recorded to save the effort, but apparently people pay more attention when it's live – and it was oddly just as dull doing it for real. Food, water, clothes, blankets, tent, comm, flare, 232

medical kit. Everything was there. So was the navigator, but that was of pretty limited use without a map to download – though it did have some other useful functions that made it worth bringing.

I hauled the bag over my shoulder and clambered outside, finding

myself in a forest. Evergreens. It wasn't too cold, and from the blue sky it looked like morning. One thing did stick out like a sore

thumb. All the trees were identical. This world had been terra-

formed, then, and if someone had gone to that much trouble, and expense, it meant that there had to be humans here. I decided to head for the edge of the forest and get my bearings – I couldn't see anything from where I was. The escape pod also supplied a waterproof jacket and trousers that were considerably more practical than what I was wearing, so I got changed. The size adjustment on the boots was a bit basic and I found that I was between two sizes – the company cut a few corners on those, I think – so I decided to have them too loose rather than too tight.

I started walking.

I woke up two days later in a very small room and, as I tried to move, I remembered that my feet, legs and pretty much the rest of my body were all suffering the after-effects of spending so long walking through the forest with hardly a rest. I felt very warm and slightly dizzy.

'Hey, lie down again,' said a voice to my side. Hooked round and saw a young woman wearing the same standard-issue clothes as me.

She was blonde, slim and sharp-featured and, come to think of it, I recognised her. I had served her in the bar– and she was with the Doctor in the restaurant. 'Who are you?' I asked.

'Lucie,' she said. 'You?'

'Sabine. Could I have some water?'

'Course,' said Lucie and held a bottle out to me. I sipped from the straw and lay back down again. 'How are you feeling?' Lucie added.

'My head's pounding,' I said. 'I'm hot.'

'Well, you're certainly not my type. All I know is that this thing says you're getting better,' said Lucie, holding up the scanner from one of the standard-issue medical kits.

I tried, and failed, to read the screen. My head was aching.

'Why?' I asked. 'What happened?'

'Hypothermia. I found you out there in the snow.'

The snow had caught me by surprise. Having just spent two days

walking under clear skies, I thought this was fair. The clouds had arrived and the snow set in within a matter of minutes, and I had no time to find cover. Before long I was up to my knees in it. I must have fallen, or something – I still don't remember. 'Thanks,' I said, 233

which seemed woefully inadequate. 'I thought I'd have reached the edge of the forest ages ago... it just goes on and on...'

'Yeah,' said Lucie. 'Makes that one out of *Lord of the Rings* look like a slightly overgrown back garden, doesn't it?'

I had no idea what she was talking about, which I attributed to the delirium. 'Where are we now?'

'In my tent,' she said.

I propped myself up and looked around properly. 'Oh, of course.

I'm always showing people how to put these up but I've hardly ever been inside one.'

'Yeah, I was at the safety session. I saw you.'

'Did you get the tent up all right?'

'Yeah. I mean, they're not a massive challenge, are they? Just

press some buttons and there it is.' She tapped on the wall with her knuckle.

'But how did you pitch it in this weather?'

'Er... I didn't. It was still up from the night before. I overslept,'

she said, biting her bottom lip.

'Could you turn the lights down a little?'

'Oh, sure. Sorry.' She turned the dial next to the hatch and the

tent darkened.

‘Thanks. Is it still snowing?’

‘No, it stopped not long after I got you inside. But I’m not sure how to get out. It’s almost covered the whole tent. We’ve just got a little bit sticking out on top. I’m afraid to open the hatch in case we get a big drift in here.’

‘Easy. You can adjust the heat retention of the outer skin. Turn it down to nothing, that’ll let out the heat and the snow should melt away.’

Lucie blinked. ‘Yeah, that should work. Perhaps I’d have thought

of that if I’d paid attention in GCSE physics.’

She was still confusing me. She adjusted the heating controls,

then pointed at them and turned to me. ‘Have I done that right?’

I nodded. ‘It’ll take a little while. Have a look in about half an hour.’

‘I think you still need some rest anyway.’

‘I’m feeling better actually.’ I turned to lie on my side. ‘I think I remember you. You were with that guy on the ship, weren’t you?’

‘What, the Doctor?’

‘Yes. I saw him again, just before I got out. He helped me into an escape pod.’

Lucie bristled. ‘He does that whether you like it or not. I wanted to stay and help, he bundled me into one of them pods and had me

ejected, thank you very much.’

‘He’ll have just been looking out for you.’

‘I can look out for myself. I think he’s a bit sexist sometimes.

Or... speciesist. I’m going to have words with him next time I see him.’

‘If he got off the ship...’

‘He’ll have got off. He’s got more lives than all those cats in the crazy old cat lady’s house at the end of my road combined, that

one.’

A little later, we emerged into a near-perfect circle where the snow had melted away. Lucie packed up the tent whilst I established

which way was which in the much-changed landscape: we didn’t

want to go deeper into the forest. She’d had the same idea as me, and her pod had the same fault with the maps.

It took me a surprisingly long time to notice the flecks of colour under the snow on the nearest trees… and on every tree within view.

‘Lucie?’

‘What?’

‘Look. There’s something on the trees.’ I couldn’t see what they

were under the snow, but they glinted red, yellow, purple, blue,

silver, gold.

Lucie marched over to the tree, declared it to be ‘Funny,’ then

shook the snow off.

‘Should you do that?’ I asked. ‘They might be, I don’t know…

anything. They might explode.’

She gave me an odd look. ‘Give over,’ she said, brushing more

snow from a branch to reveal that hanging from it at regular

intervals were gold and silver discs. She pulled one from the tree, and it came away easily.

‘Is it metal?’ I asked.

‘No. Dunno what it is.’

She handed it to me; I can a finger over it. ‘Feels like shrink-

wrap.’ There was an overlap at the edge and I pulled at it. The layer of

plastic came away and underneath...

'Chocolate,' said Lucie.

'You're joking?'

'One way to find out,' Lucie said, took it from me and popped it in her mouth. 'Mm,' she said. 'And good thick chocolate. Not the rubbish you always used to get in these when I was a kid.'

I plucked another coin from the branch, unwrapped and ate it. It was good. We each took a couple more: then, I noticed something.

'Lucie?'

'Whum?' she asked through a mouthful of chocolate.

'Have you looked at the pictures on these?'

Lucie shook her head.

'Isn't this, er, you?' I held out one of the coins and she scrutinised it.

'It is as well,' she said. 'How...' She quickly grabbed more of the coins and looked at each one. 'I'm on all of them. Not a bad likeness, really, but I think I've got a bit more up front, though.'

She swept the snow from more brunches: she was on every coin we could find. We also uncovered several shiny cylinders of various colours. Lucie laughed. 'Crackers.'

'Christmas crackers on alien trees on a distant planet.' I ate another chocolate coin whilst I considered this. 'But who put all this here? And, er, why?'

Lucie shrugged. 'Dunno about the first part. Santa maybe. But as

for the second part, I'd guess it's because it's Christmas.'

I checked my chronometer. She was right. Five days in stasis,

plus two out here walking, made it 24 December, Earth time. It was early evening where we were. 'But how, though? They weren't here

before.' I turned to Lucie. 'Are you sure I was only asleep for a few hours?'

'I'm not one for making stuff up...' Lucie pulled at one of the

crackers –a bright red one – then pulled at it again. It didn't come away from the branch. 'Stuck,' she said and examined it more

closely. Then she craned her neck forward for a better look. 'Now, that I do not believe,' she said, and gestured for me to look too.

The cracker was joined to the tree by a tiny stem, which faded

from green at the tree end to red at the cracker end. It was growing out of the tree.

'How,' said Lucie, 'is that possible?'

'Just bio-engineering,' I said. 'Not really any different from

making a tree grow bigger or greener apples or whatever.'

'It's a *bit* different.'

'Not that much. I've never seen one that did this before, but I've seen lots of experiments with making stuff grow on trees. Back

home they even had one that grew bacon.' I look around. 'They

must've wired this in when they terra-formed. If it happens every year, they should put it on the tour.' Lucie searched her bag and found a knife. She cut the cracker's stem and removed it from the tree. Then she pointed the cracker towards me. 'Come on, then.'

'What? Pull it?'

Lucie nodded.

I had visions of this all being some elaborate trap, but Lucie's

confidence drew me along even though I had no reason to believe

that she knew any better than me. I took the other end and we

pulled.

The snap was impressively heavy, resounding from the trees

around us, but the fizz of coloured lights left something to be

desired. Lucie seemed impressed though. She was also gloating

slightly because she won. She tipped the cracker upside down and

let the prizes slide out. First she put the hat on, then she read out the joke.

‘What do you call a Rutan playing a trumpet?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Rutan tootin’.’

I gave it some thought. ‘I don’t get it.’ Mainly because I didn’t know what a ‘Rutan’ was. I still don’t.

‘Neither do I. But I know who does. This is one of the Doctor’s

jokes. Such as it is.’

‘So he’s… a joke writer for Christmas crackers?’

‘No.’ Lucie paused. ‘At least, not that I know of. But look at my picture on all the coins. I think he’s trying to send me a message.’

‘What else was in that one?’

Lucie held up a scroll, only a little smaller than the cracker itself, and a whistle. She unfurled the scroll and we both looked at the

collection of lines and symbols inside.

‘It’s a map!’ exclaimed Lucie.

More than that, it was a map of where we were, comprising the

forest and a settlement just outside it. There was an arrow pointing at the forest marked ‘You Are Here’, and another one pointing at

the settlement marked ‘We Are Being Held Hostage Here. Help!’

‘Do you think that’s where we are?’ I asked, pointing at the first arrow. Lucie looked at me. ‘I’d have thought that’s what it meant, yeah.’

‘No, I mean can we trust it to be accurate?’

‘I reckon so. I reckon the Doctor’s put this here. He must be in

trouble.’ Lucie sighed. ‘Typical.’

‘But how would he know that you’d pick that cracker, of all the

ones you could’ve picked?’

Lucie looked around, then trudged through the snow towards one

of the other trees. She plucked another cracker from a branch, then went to the next tree and took one from that, then grabbed five more before coming back to me. We pulled one of the crackers: this time I won, and looked inside. I found a hat – which Lucie insisted I put on – the same joke again, another whistle and another map. We

pulled more: more whistles, more maps.

‘So what are the whistles for?’ I asked. There was a label on the 237

side: *Fairy Summoner. They do your bidding! Impress your friends and family!*

Lucie put one to her lips and blew it. It made no noise. She

looked at it. ‘Did it work or is it like one of those dog ones?’

‘No idea.’

‘You blow one.’

I did so. It tasted faintly of wood and rosewater. Mine made no

noise either. But then I heard something else, and so did Lucie.

Movement, coming from the tops of the trees. The snow was sliding

away, and there was a sound like wings beating. There were small, slender, light-coloured creatures emerging from under the snow:

they rose, then swooped down towards us, those delicate-looking

wings beating rapidly. I ducked and covered my head.

A few seconds later, nothing too alarming had happened. Lucie

tapped my shoulder. ‘It’s all right,’ she said. ‘Er, I think.’

I looked up. Hovering in front of us was a row of 12 tiny fairies, each about thirty centimetres high. They had glowing skin, wide

eyes and smiling mouths. They were sort of scary, though I quickly gathered that they were flesh constructs of some kind. ‘Do they do our bidding?’ I asked.

‘Dunno,’ said Lucie. ‘I haven’t bidden them yet.’ She blew on the whistle again. ‘Er, you lot. Fly round in a circle,’ she said.

The fairies stood to attention, then flew up and started to whizz around in a neat, evenly spaced formation.

Lucie looked over at me and raised her eyebrows. Then she blew

the whistle again. ‘That’s nice,’ she said to the fairies, who stopped circling and looked down at her. ‘How about helping us clear a path through all this snow? We want to go that way.’ She pointed.

The fairies nodded in unison, then swooped down to the surface

of the snow and, surprisingly, burst into flames one by one. They pushed a fast line through the snow, melting it away – more than

that, the snow simply vaporised. They did this for about two

hundred metres before Lucie blew the whistle again. The fairies

stopped, rose into the air and returned. There wasn’t a mark on

them. Even their little wispy clothes were intact.

‘I… don’t remember that being traditional,’ I said. ‘Do you?’

We weren’t that far from the edge of the forest and, with the fairies’

help, it only took a couple of hours to walk out. Night had fallen.

Right at the edge, in a valley, was a small colony town, which if we'd navigated it properly had to be the one marked on the map

with the 'Help!' sign. Unsurprisingly, given the local materials to hand, much of it was built of wood. It was totally deluged with

snow. Lucie got a waterproof sheet out of her bag, placed it on an 238

outcrop of ground overlooking the town, and lay down on it.

'What are you doing?' I asked.

'D'you want them to see us?' she replied.

'Who?'

'The hostage takers.'

'I can't see any hostage takers.'

'Then *get down* before they see us.' She blew her whistle and gestured for the fairies to get down onto the sheet as well. I

followed suit. 'Wish we had some binoculars,' Lucie said.

I reached into my bag, brought out the navigator and flipped the

lens cap off the camera. I handed the navigator to Lucie. 'Stroke the control on the side to 200m in and out,' I told her.

'Oh,' said Lucie. 'Cheers.' She took them from me and pointed it

at the town. 'Has this got infra-red?'

'Infra-what?'

'So you can see in the dark.'

I reached across, brought up the menu and switched night vision

on. 'Cheers,' said Lucie again. 'This is an ace gadget, isn't it? I might keep mine.' She fixed her gaze on the screen and zoomed in.

I tried to see over her shoulder. 'Quiet,' she said. 'Very, very quiet.'

A few paths had been dug through the snow between the buildings,

but there was no one about. One of the buildings, a large one right at the centre of the settlement, had lights on: none of the others did.

‘We,’ said Lucie, ‘need a plan.’

I peered around the corner of the building we were hiding behind.

The central building was a short distance away, and we could hear very, very muffled noises of movement and conversation coming

from inside.

‘Don’t look,’ scolded Lucie.

‘Why haven’t they started yet?’ I asked her.

‘Because I haven’t given them the signal yet. Calm down, you.’

‘I thought that was the signal?’

‘Thought what was the signal?’

‘Just now.’

‘That was the signal for them to take up positions. I’m going to

do the signal for them to start.’

‘When?’

‘Now.’

‘Oh. Okay.’

‘If that’s quite all right with you.’

‘Yes. Fine.’

Lucie blew her whistle again. The noise of the fairies lighting up was audible through the night air. I glanced at the building, ignoring 239

Lucie telling me not to again, and saw one side of the wall catching fire.

‘Is it lit?’ asked Lucie.

I turned back to her and nodded.

‘Be ready to put it out if it gets out of control.’ We’d found fire extinguishers in one of the outbuildings, but no weapons,

irritatingly. Lucie didn’t seem to think that was important. She liked her plan as it was.

About a minute later, the door to the central building opened and two men, dressed in crew overalls from the *Excelsior*, rushed out holding weapons. I recognised them right away as part of the group who had hijacked the ship. They made a surprised exclamation

when they saw the fire, and dashed back inside to fetch

extinguishers. They returned and put the fire out, which saved us the trouble of doing it.

‘Now?’ asked Lucie and I told her yes. She blew the whistle once

more and the fairies swooped down from the roof and blazed in

front of the two men’s eyes. They cried out, temporarily blinded.

Lucie and I rushed over and plunged the hypo-syringes from our

medical kits into their arms and gave them each a heavy dose of

general anaesthetic before they even saw us coming. Even as they

fell unconscious to 1he floor we were already taking cover again.

‘I wasn’t thinking,’ I said after a glance back. ‘We should’ve

taken their guns.’

Lucie shrugged. ‘Naaah. We’ll be all right without.’

Five more people came out, again with guns. This time Lucie

blew down hard on her whistle and didn’t stop until she’d run out of breath. I joined her.

Within moments, the little town was swept by a storm of fairies,

trailing fire across the sky. The armed men had no idea what was

happening, and you couldn’t exactly blame them. The fairies didn’t hurt anyone – that is, as long as the men didn’t stupidly try to swat

them away and burn their hands – and Lucie and I were able to

easily dart between them without being seen. I tried to shut out the flurry of burning, criss-crossing lights and focus on grabbing arms and plunging the hypo into them. I concentrated on the hiss of the hypo as it automatically sterilised itself.

Everything stopped. Lucie and I stood amid seven unconscious

bodies: she had the whistle to her lips. The fairies hung in the air around us, awaiting further instructions. Lucie strode over to the door, which was closed and locked.

'How do we get inside?' I asked.

Lucie gave two of the fairies instructions, then they flew to the 240

hinges and smouldered them free from the door. Lucie dodged back

as the door fell outwards and landed heavily in the snow, then she had to dodge gunfire as two more armed men raced forwards.

'How many more?' Lucie moaned, then she whistled and ordered

the fairies to fly at the oncoming assault.

They buzzed around the men's baffled faces and Lucie simply

stepped over to them and said, 'Hold out your arms please.' They

did so, transfixed and pretty terrified by the fiery things hanging close enough to singe theft facial hair, of which they had quite a bit.

Lucie dosed them up and they tumbled to the wooden floorboards.

Lucie exhaled heavily. 'Is that the lot?'

I looked inside the doorway. A man was approaching along the

corridor, his hands behind his back. He strolled outside and

surveyed our handiwork, then looked up at mc.

'Hello again,' the Doctor said. 'Glad to see you made it.'

'Glad to see you made it too,' I said.

'Oi,' said Lucie.

The Doctor turned to face her. ‘Good work, Lucie.’ He glanced

down at the hijackers. ‘They’re not dead, are they?’

‘Course not,’ said Lucie.

‘Just checking, just checking.’

‘I’ve got something I’d like to “just check”,’ said Lucie. ‘Did I give you permission to shove me in an escape pod and chuck me off the cruiser? Because I don’t remember that at all.’

The Doctor winced. ‘Please, Lucie, could we not do this here?

And could one of you untie my hands?’

There was a lot of gratitude. Lucie and I were given the freedom of the town – which is a pretty sizeable city these days. After the

hijackers were restrained and the other escapees from the ship –

including the ambassador – had been contacted, I asked the Doctor about the *Excelsior*. ‘Saved,’ he said. ‘It’s in orbit right now. It went extremely well, actually. All up to the point where the hijackers captured me.’

‘So how did you all end up here?’

‘They followed the escape pods, hoping they’d find their target,

and ended up here. Ordered the inhabitants to use the weather

controls to turn up the snow, basically hoping the survivors would get caught in it and die... but their technical lads told me about the Christmas “bloom” programmed into the trees – which, as luck

would have it, were due to come out within a day. As we’d been

given access to the environmental controls, reprogramming the trees and changing the contents of the crackers, giving the fairies a few little extra abilities, was easy. I knew Lucie would pick up on it.’

‘Sharp as a tack, me,’ said Lucie drily, walking over to us.

‘Doctor, have you seen this?’ She was cradling one of the fairies. It

looked weak – ill, in fact.

'Hmm,' said the Doctor. 'I was afraid of this...'

'What?' I said.

'Living beings designed for decorative purposes. They're not designed to exist for longer than a few days...'

'Oh, no,' said Lucie.

I shrugged. 'That's pretty normal.'

The Doctor glowered at me. 'It shouldn't be. These are living creatures – creating them doesn't give anyone the right to throw them away when you don't need them any more.'

'But they're not intelligent...'

'How'd you know?' snapped Lucie. 'And after they helped us too...'

'I must admit, I haven't exactly helped either,' said the Doctor. 'My modifications to them have only hastened the end, I expect. They've literally burned brightly, but all the more briefly.'

I suddenly felt very, very bad. 'Well, isn't there anything you can do?'

The Doctor smiled. 'I never said there wasn't.'

The Doctor worked all through Christmas Day. He synthesised a smart drug that he said would 'fix' the fairies, but he wouldn't tell anyone the exact details, probably because he was afraid they'd undo it. He told the townspeople, in no uncertain terms, that he didn't approve and that he wouldn't tolerate another batch of fairies being grown for the trees next year.

He and Lucie left after that.

The fairies didn't die. If you go there today, you can see them

there still, flying through the forest. He made them all live. Nobody knows how long for. Maybe they'll outlive us all; maybe they'll be there for ever. You should go and see them some day though,

they're something really special. Just don't get too close to them, that's all.

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The Stars Our Contamination

Steven Savile

An Adventure of the Sixth Doctor, with Peri

Day One

Usmanov and Kroenke are dead.

That leaves 21 of us.

I always thought hope was supposed to be the last thing to die.

It isn't

We lost hope last night but we're still here.

The apocalypse began with rain – all very biblical. There wasn't

forty days and nights of the stuff, but I always thought that was metaphorical. The downpour only lasted three days – but in that

short time more than three months worth of rain fell. It was chaos.

Overnight, the roads tamed into rivers. We took to the high ground, most of us seeking refuge in the office blocks downtown. I looked out of the windows as the sky turned black and saw the moon catch fire. Imagine that, the moon in the sky burning like the sun.

Thinking of it now still sends shivers down my spine.

For a while we passed messages with mirrors and candles

between the skyscrapers, but it has been 24 hours since we've seen a signal from any of the blocks around us. A whole day alone. I

don't think anyone appreciated how vulnerable water could make

us. We've become so reliant upon electricity. The old cultures had their gods; the sun and moon. Last night we prayed to junction

boxes and fuses begging for the power to come back on.

It didn't.

Gretchen's baby didn't make it. That was hard, but it was a

blessing in a way. She cried. The noise was like a beacon to the

Infected.

They are out there now, crowded around the bottom of the tower.

I can hear them. I miss the baby's crying – and I never thought I'd say that – because, when she cried, well, as stupid as it sounds, it was a human noise. Compared to what we have to listen to now,

that dreadful low keening moan that never seems to stop, well, I'd 243

take a few baby tears every day of the week.

Last night was the worst. It stopped raining – most of us thought that was going to be a blessing; it'd give the circuits time to dry out and the repair crews a chance to get out to the generators and the power plants, fire things up again, bring back the great god

electricity!

We should have known it was never going to be that simple.

Usmanov saw the lights in the sky first; he thought they were

God's tears. He was a simple soul. It feels wrong using the word

'was' now. He was right here last night. I sat by the huge glass

windows, listening as he named the heavens. He didn't use the

names I'd grown up with. He called them things like Acubens and

Pleione, Sadalsuud and Denebola and so many other strange-

sounding words I can't remember. He made them all seem so...

mythical. He showed me the red vines that linked the stars like

strings and tried to explain the science of what we saw but even he was at a loss when the Christmas star began to bleed.

I don't know any other way to explain it; while he was pointing

up at Ruchbah the halo of light around it turned red, and all across the night sky the stars cried tears of blood. After the fires of the moon I thought it was the end, Armageddon, the Apocalypse, the

Big Whimper.

Levy and Pettersson risked a food run. We tried to stop them but

they argued us down. The vending machines are empty and it's

been days since anyone ate something more than a candy bar or

drank a soda. They barely made it back. The avenues are all six feet under, the drains flooded. The shops have all been looted. Disaster brings the worst out in people; that's something new I have learned.

I watched the rescue helicopter try to airlift an injured man from the roof of the Global News Tower three blocks down – it's a dwarf

next to our megalith. Even before it got close to the tower people on the building beside it were firing their guns at the helicopter

because it had passed them by. They lowered a cradle for the

injured man but everyone tried to climb onto it and no one would let go. They were so frightened they pulled the bird out of the sky. The rotors clipped the side of the building as it tried to pull free and a moment later it was a fireball. No one made it. Just like that. One moment a dozen people were clinging to the wire harness, too

petrified to let go, the next they were all gone.

The windows spared us the screams.

We've given up expecting another rescue helicopter to make it

out to us. Why should they if all we're going to do is pull them out of the sky?

An hour later someone noticed the red smears on the windows of

the Spire, a casino-hotel complex over on Sixth Avenue. It was like something out of Hollywood. All across the facade, crimson flowers blossomed, rising floor by floor as the Infected hunted down the

survivors that had taken refuge 1here. I didn't want to believe what my imagination conjured. When they came level with our windows

there could be no mistaking it though. Faces hit the glass until they ruptured, then the Infected fell upon the corpses. I couldn't see, but I imagined them eating the mess of brains they had opened up.

That's what they do in horror movies, isn't it? Brains! Brains! Even now it makes me laugh. How inappropriate is that? Braaaaaains!

It is only a matter of time until they breach our building.

We all know it.

So we sit and we wait and inside we tear ourselves apart with the most primeval of instincts: fear.

That's why Usmanov and Kroenke made a break for it. They took

their fate into their own hands. Kroenke had been Delta Force. Past tense says it all; all the training in the world couldn't save him.

It's every man, girl and child for themselves – that's the message that's made it out to the remote outposts where the Infected have yet to tread. Corpses are floating like driftwood from door to door

looking for a place to wash up.

Have you ever seen a floater after a couple of days in the water?

You don't really want to. The skin bloats, the features swelling so badly even their mothers wouldn't recognise them.

And they stink.

Levy found part of Usmanov's left arm floating by the Municipal

Bank down on Main – six blocks from here. There's no telling

where the rest of him washed up – assuming it wasn't eaten by the Infected. It was grey and slimy. Levy handled it like a dead fish. He

figured it was the big man's because the third finger wore his

wedding ring. It was hardly the most unique ring, though, and a lot of married men wear rings. I knew it was Usmanov's because of the freckles – he had shown me them the night before and explained

how they matched the eight stars of Ursae Majoris. We can't stay

here.

But there's nowhere we can go.

Somehow I don't think any of us will be home for Christmas.

It's funny. Not funny ha ha; funny peculiar – a few days ago all I had to worry about was which jumbo toy to buy, what would make

me the best dad in the world for a few hours. Now I have the entire world to worry about.

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Day Two

None of us could sleep last night

We had visitors.

All night.

Hammering on the glass doors trying to get in.

Muttering about integrity, Brunner went down before sunrise to

check on the doors. With the electricity dead, the elevators are out of action. Thirty-six floors is a long way down.

I used to laugh when I heard people say the horror was

indescribable, then go on to describe it, or at least try to, but I think I understand now. I walked across the foyer toward the huge

security-toughened glass doors. It was so utterly alien.

I must have crossed the foyer a thousand times, nodded to the

security guard, run my pass through the sensor humming along to

the piped Muzak. Not this time. This time I was frightened as I

walked through the darkened room. I could hear them before I saw

them, that same low keening moan going on and on and on. It

shredded my nerves raw.

Then I saw them.

Their faces were pressed up agains1 the glass and they were

slamming their fists up against it over and over, so hard they were bloody from the damage. For a moment it was hard to get beyond

the fact that they all looked just like me – well, normal, not cloned, obviously. Monsters are meant to look like monsters, not

accountants, sales clerks, bus drivers and hot dog vendors. Imagine Frankenstein in a hot dog vendor uniform – and he doesn't look

frightening at all, but he is still a monster, isn't he? As I moved closer, my nearness caused a flurry of movement within the press of bodies as the Infected tried to reach me through the glass. I don't know if they were reacting to my blood, my body heat, the flare of my aura or something else that told them I wasn't part of their

sickness.

And then, with only the thin sheet of glass between us, I looked

into their eyes. What I didn't see placed a chill in my heart. I didn't see the vitality of life.

I expected the glass to rupture at any moment and the Infected to come spilling into the foyer and sweep me away in their tide of

mindless death. And for a moment I thought I would be free.

It didn't.

But that didn't mean it wouldn't.

A hand hit the glass, then the owner slid down to her knees and

someone else pushed their way into the space she had just vacated –

I saw the military colours and for a moment I thought we were

saved. Then the soldier lifted the woman bodily and sank his teeth into her neck and salvation turned into damnation. I turned and ran back up every las1 flight of stairs until I reached the others.

Nineteen scared faces were waiting for us to come back. The

conversation went something like this:

ME:

We've got to get out of here.

THEM: How? Where can we go?

ME:

Anywhere. We're trapped here. The glass will shatter

if they keep pounding away at it, then they are inside

and it's our heads exploding on the windows.

THEM: We're

safe

here.

ME:

Like they were in the Spire? We're not safe, we're

sitting ducks. Ge1 that into your thick heads!

THEM: Stop it, you're frightening us.

ME:

I don't care. We've got to get out of here. They're

coming.

And around and around we went, like dancing partners or boxers

sparring. The argument ended with a detonation down below. The

glass had given in. I was right but I took no joy in it. The Infected were in our building. I didn't know how they hunted, if it was by smell or sound or sight, if they had any kind of cunning or if they were the brain-dead zombies of all those stupid movies I grew up

laughing at.

All knew, right then, was that I didn't want to die. I wanted to go home. I had two great reasons to find my way out of this place.

In terms of resources, we were just about broke. That's the beauty of society today – or rather until a couple of days ago. We're

hooked up, wired in, tuned in, turned on, spectrographic,

hieroglyphic, gloriously technicoloured, and alive with

connectivity. Everything we want or could ever imagine wanting,

available just a few keystrokes away. Until you pull the plug. Then we're fumbling about in the dark, regressed and decidedly less

resourceful than our Palaeolithic ancestors.

We had office supplies in plenty, but none of the staples. Doesn't that paint a stupid picture in your head? A bunch of people hunting down zombies with staplers. We had no food. Put like that it isn't so amusing. We couldn't go out the front door, and no helicopters

were going to scoop us up off the roof. There was no way down I

could think of – the Infected would find the stairs eventually, so taking them would be playing straight into their hands, and the

elevators were out of commission.

Tyler, one of the engineers from division, came up with an idea –

it meant going up to the winches on the roof, but given the lack of alternatives we were all game. He broke into the maintenance locker beside the winch house. It was full of all sorts of stuff, most of it useless without electricity to power it, like the winch itself.

Holdstock and Bachman wanted to try to jury-rig the window-

cleaner's platform and couldn't seem to grasp the idea that without juice they'd never get it moving so might as well try abseiling down from the roof using toilet rolls from the supply cupboards. Tyler found what he was looking for – at first glance it looked a little like a huge staple gun, but was in fact a grip the maintenance guys used to climb the steel tension wires that hauled the elevator up and

down when they needed to work on the lift shafts. There were eight sets of the grips and eight harnesses, one for each of the eight lift shafts, meaning eight people could descend at a time. Then we had to winch the grips back up before the next lot could go down. It was sound in theory, ludicrous in practice. To work all eight elevators had to be at the bottom – they weren't – and descending hand over hand over five hundred metres took more upper body strength than

any of us had.

Carlson was smart enough to think about securing the grips to the smaller equipment winch before the first group headed down. And

thank god he did; Coupland didn't make it. After eight floors he

started screaming and panicking, after ten he was begging and after 13 he was falling. We hauled his grip back up. For a moment it was 1hat pragmatic. He fell, we needed his grip. The next person went down without a harness. That person was me. Without the harness, I had to make do with a pair of workman's gloves and hope to hell

my boots wouldn't be torn apart by the friction.

I made it halfway before I slipped, my arms on fire. I snatched at the cable and clung on.

In the end it felt like I fell every one of 36 storeys.

The metal cable burned through the suede palm of the gloves and

tore away at my hands until they were seared raw – I blacked out as the speed of my descent shredded the thick leather of my left boot –

I screamed and almost let go.

But I didn't.

At the bottom I lay panting and gasping and bleeding beside

Coupland's ruined body, what was left of my hands clasped to my sides – they were useless.

We lost three more to the shaft, and four were trapped up top when the Infected breached the roof.

Thirteen of us made it out of the shaft, out through the underground car park and into the city.

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Seven didn't.

Seven people I had already begun to think of as friends. Seven people who before the end of the world I would almost certainly never have had the time of day for, but now I mourned them.

I stopped thinking of anyone that way after the descent. So that night I lit candles for Coupland, Campbell, Williams, Block, Bruen, Anderson and McBain and prayed for their souls.

Day Three

We only wanted to go home.

Every one of us had someone out there we loved and wanted to get back to: wives, husbands, sons, daughters. The thoughts of them drove us on. I didn't talk to the others about my fears – the dark played havoc with my mind. I saw them dead. I saw the Infected crawling all over them. I saw the blood and the flies. And, in the background, I imagined tunes: *Jingle Bells* and *Holiday Rock*, far too light and bouncy, and *White Christmas* and *You're a Mean One, Mister Grinch*, darker and more subversive against the backdrop of slaughter.

I didn't want to go home because I was terrified that I might walk in on my imagination and not be able to cope with losing them all.

We weren't alone out there – that surprised me more than anything. I don't know, up in the skyscraper looking down on the

world, I had somehow imagined that it had all gone to hell in a hand basket, that there were no survivors.

I was wrong.

The waters had receded, but were still ankle deep in places where the gutters remained flooded. We stuck to dry land, skirting the

worst of the flooding. Most of the morning was spent in search of food – the big stores had been looted, and we were stuck in the

business district. We needed to work our way out of the centre,

toward the hills where the rich folk lived in their impossible houses.

The Christmas lights looked miserable blacked-out, Santas and

reindeer and Guiding Stars hanging on limp lines across the top of the streets. The three huge Christmas trees down by the main square had toppled, blocking off the rest of the street. We had to double and triple back, herded by the low keening moans of the Infected

trying desperately to move forward while staying away from their

shambling ranks. Keening, that's the only word I can think of to

describe the sound. I know it is a repetition, and if I have any

literary pretensions I am killing them dead repeating myself over and over. Maybe a dictionary would provide some suitable

synonyms. It wasn't a cry or a gnashing of teeth or a wail. It was a 249

lament. A low keening lament. That's the only way I can put words to it.

On the corner of Garrison we saw three men, dressed like

paramilitary, all blacked up and wearing face masks. They gunned

down a line of the Infected while we watched in stunned horror. It was like one of the old Tin Pan Alley games – bang, bang, they shot them down. I thought I knew what gunfire sounded like until I

heard it – it wasn't staccato, one gun filled in the silence left by the next and the next until it was a solid wall of anger, brutal, short, like hair being ripped clean out of my scalp. I'd never heard anything like

it. I hoped I would never hear anything like it again.

Before we left the shelter of the skyscraper, Hood had torn up Coupland's T-shirt and wadded up bandages out of it, binding the material around my hands with duct tape. I felt like I was wearing huge oven gloves. I didn't feel much like a super hero – or a survivor.

None of us could move quickly.

We limped along Delaney and across Twelfth, skulking along against the huge plate windows of the department stores, casting fretful glances at the mannequins as though they might suddenly lurch to life and come out of the windows to ambush us. On the corner we found the girl. She was struggling to break free from a rag-clothed tramp who was screaming about the end of the world being upon us.

Carlson smacked the fool around the side of the head while I pulled the girl away. She was short, dark, and had this kind of elfin prettiness about her. I couldn't imagine what she was doing out in the middle of hell, alone.

She had to be lost.

But, then, weren't we all?

We saw more vigilantes – these ones were less paramilitary and more biker gang to look at, taking on the Infected with chains and bats from the backs of their hogs and choppers. It would have been laughable if it wasn't so frightening.

The noise was everywhere, dragging feet, moaning, it was like a permanent ghost on the wind; the lament of the damned. There was a moment, with them shuffling out of the huge arch of the shopping mall, and out of every orifice of the department store frontage

across the street as well as out of the mouths of each of the five streets that fed the square, when we went from lost to damned.

We had nowhere left to run.

They lurched closer, a noose closing around our throats.

And then the girl, Peri, saw the entrance to the subway beneath

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the branches of the fallen Christmas trees with their stupid baubles and started pulling them out of the way.

With no choice, we went down into the utter dark, holding hands,

in single file.

Days Four, Five and Six – They All Became A Blur

The rats owned the underground.

The rain flushed them out of their lairs. None of us had thought

about it when we made the descent but of course the floods had

them panicked. They were out in their thousands, scratching and

foraging in the filth of the train tunnels and the sewers, swimming in their own filth – there I go with the repetition again –where the passages were still flooded, crawling over every sleeper and under every stone where they weren't. And the peculiar acoustics of the underground world carried their skitterings everywhere, amplifying them to a maddening pandemonium – but rather that than the eerie

moans and sighs of the Infected.

At least the rats were alive.

The others started to look to me like some kind of leader down

there. In the dark we lost the rhythm of time, it all became one long dark claustrophobic night. We could have been down there hours or days, moving inch by inch, always sure the Infected would find us and we wouldn't be able to run for fear of falling off a platform –

and hitting the mythical third rail even though there was nothing left

to power it – or through a vent, into the black water with the rats.

The dark crushed in like a physical force, with its own weight and substance. We only meant to find our way under the lines of the

Infected, to find another way out of the city, fifty metres, a hundred, from one exit to the next, or a mile at most to the next station. We ended up stranded in the dark, in the world below, haunted by all the ghosts of our city, imagined and undead. Haunted by our own

breath and our shuffling feet and sure what we heard heralded the Infected moving through the dark. We had the same shuffling gait, our fear coming out of our mouths in the same desperate wail.

Directions turned themselves around so that we couldn't tell left from right and when it felt like our path was sloping gradually up it took us down and down.

Whenever we stopped walking I felt the rats crawling up my leg.

And when we stumbled into the water there were leeches to suck

on us. Gretchen started hearing her daughter crying. That was the first sign of her sickness. She wasn't the strongest to begin with, and when she started talking to the dead, saying she was coming,

we knew she was in trouble.

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I don't know how long we had been down there when the Tannoy

system crackled into life, shrill with a voice like God that filled our minds.

I don't know if there is anyone out there that can hear

me. I am broadcasting on Emergency Frequency 2112.

If you can hear me there is hope for us all. I am the

Doctor. I have a message for the uninfected: don't

drink the water. This is important. I have isolated the

cause, if not the cure. The contagion is in the water.

The sickness is spread through contact, blood, saliva. Don't let them cut you. If you get 1heir blood on you the pathogen will be absorbed through the epidermal layers into the blood. The Infected are not themselves – but they are not monsters either. Believe me, they can be cured. I know they can. I just don't know how... not yet. Listen to me. They are not dead. They are not monsters. They are still your loved ones. Still your friends. Understand that. They are still who they always were. Like any sickness it will pass. Their bodies are fighting the contagion. Do not give up on them. Help them fight it. That does not make them less dangerous, it makes them more so because we remember who they are but they do not remember us. If they corner you, they will kill you, so RUN! There is a place. It is called the TARDIS. It is safe. I can't tell you where it is for fear they are listening, but there are clues within the city. Find them. And know tha1 there are people out here now, looking for a cure. They won't let you down, just buy them time. Keep faith with humanity. Stay safe.

How he spoke to us, with no electricity to conduct his words, I couldn't begin to explain. Somehow he broadcast his message: there was a safe place – though God alone knew where it was.

God and Peri.

I don't even know how much the Doctor said and how much I made up in my own head, desperate to believe we had a friend out there but we heard the message several times during our time down there.

And then Peri led us into the light.

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Day Seven

A dozen skyscrapers blazed, towering infernos stabbing the firmament. It was like stepping out into some vision of hell. The 12 giant tongues of flame turned night daybright. Cars lay on their sides and on their roofs where the floods had dumped them. Rats and mongrels rotted in the gutter beside suited business men. We saw the Infected, aimlessly wandering until they caught our scent and turned our way.

We came up for air gasping, every one of us changed by our time in the dark, and it was as though we emerged into a new world utterly removed from the one we had been forced to flee.

Devastation had been wrought on the streets of our city.

And we understood another primal fear intimately: the dark.

We ran.

Faces bore testament to the horrors they had lived through and the losses they had suffered. There was no order. The things the survivors had clung to like life rafts, their jobs and their designer suits, stocks and bonds and options and futures, had no options and no future. Their world was undone by the rising tide.

Peri thought she knew the way.

All through the dark she had told us stories of the Doctor,

wondrous things meant I am sure to spur us on and instil hope, but it was hard to believe in the wizard all the while expecting the great curtain of On to be pulled back. As a voice he was godlike; in her tall tales, divine... but the man could not be either of those things.

But the voice had promised safety, that we could believe in. We

followed her to a park in one of the older parts of the business

district. Pre-skyscraper era buildings crowded in on all sides, ones dating back to when architecture was more than straight lines and bullet proof glass. Gargoyles and fancies crowded along rails

overlooking the streets.

She said the Doctor had left her there, sent her out into the city to find people like us and bring them to this place she called the

TARDIS, but there was no final redoubt in the park. No shelter. No promised safety. There were benches and pigeons and not much

else. Peri ran screaming through the bushes and the trees yelling:

‘Doctor! Doctor!’

He didn’t answer her cries.

We were alone.

Just like that

Like we always knew we were.

Day Eight

We thought they were statues.

They weren’t.

Vigilantes had killed them and posed them, making a perverse art

out of the Infected dead. All across the Lower East Side of the city the Infected stood, skin like wax, left to rot in the rain.

It was vile. And there were more such horrors across the city.

We found a tram-car full of bodies. We found a serpentine pond

where the only fish were human, floating on the surface. We found a bakery that reeked of burned meat. We found those and so many

more horrors.

Still the infection spread.

Peri swore the Doctor would not abandon us. But he wasn't there.

There was no sanctuary for us.

Only death.

Day Nine

Tyler started coughing.

He sought me out in the middle of the night.

We both knew what it meant.

He was a good man.

A brave man.

He begged me but I couldn't kill him. I kept thinking about that

looped message. They were looking for a cure. He stared me

straight in the eye and asked me if I believed – truly believed – that this Doctor we'd never seen, who hadn't been where Peri promised, could save us. When I didn't answer he left us.

We found him come daybreak.

He deserved better.

Day Ten

They ambushed us in the last hour before dawn, when we were at

our most vulnerable, heavy with the lethargy of sleep.

Peri had refused to sleep. I know she was frightened that she had been

abandoned with the rest of us. She really struggled to cope

with it and with not letting any of us see how worried she was. The relief she felt when one of the air-raid alarms crackled into life and repeated the Doctor's message to the uninfected was palpable.

I didn't share my doubts with her – she didn't need to hear

common sense right then. The message was word for word as I

remembered it, meaning this Doctor was either reading from a

script or it was a recording. If it was a recording there was nothing

to say he wasn't Infected himself, and out there now, wandering

aimlessly in search of his companion. You would have thought he

would have given her some sort of lo-jack so he could home in on

her whereabouts instead of leaving her at the mercy of the Infected.

Peri sat with her back against a tree while the rest of our group of misfits huddled down in the rose beds and up against each other for warmth. The night was still, but far from quiet. Sleeping was

difficult because every now and then you'd hear something in the

distance that jarred you back awake; cars being rocked over, the

trump of gasoline igniting, the shatter of huge plate glass windows surrendering, and alarms. I hadn't expected to hear alarms without electricity but most of them were rigged up onto some sort of

battery back-up for just such a predicament. So the city danced a slow zombie-waltz to the sound of alarms and it kept us from

sleeping. Alarms and those endless ululating moans – a dawn

chorus ripped straight from hell. But somehow exhaustion did take us, and we dozed fitfully.

I awoke to screams and in that blurred sleep-state trapped

somewhere between wakefulness and dream saw demons closing in

all around. Melting faces leered down at me. I rolled over and

scrambled away, my own screams adding to the mayhem. A dozen

Infected had come up from below – from the exit of a subterranean car park – and more followed, arms stretched out before them as

they lurched from foot to foot. They were a creeping horror, so slow as they gathered around us but somehow they had isolated us

completely, a ring of tainted flesh and rotten brain closing in on us.

Peri had fallen asleep. It wasn't her fault – she had been awake for three days solid like the rest of us, running on fumes and fear.

Carlson galvanised us, grabbing a fallen branch and attacking the first of the slack-faced zombies. As it went down, what we didn't know then was that it was Carlson's brother.

He bought us our lives, but at what personal cost?

That murder would come back to haunt him later – how could it

not? But right then it was the only thing that kept us alive.

Seeing one of them go down, we grabbed whatever makeshift

weapons we could find. More and more of them came at us, spilling out of the underground and out of buildings on either side of the square. There were too many of them.

I grabbed one of the stones that lined the rose garden and

wrapped my bandaged fist around it for what good it would do. I

dreaded seeing my wife's face in amongst them, or hearing my little girl's voice. It was only then that it struck me – we hadn't seen any kids among their shambling ranks. Only adults. I didn't know what
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it meant, did children simply die when they came into contact with the contagion? Was it too strong for their immune systems? Or were they immune?

They pushed us back, shepherding us toward the big tree where

Peri had fallen asleep on her watch.

I took a hit to the side of the head. The world tilted sickeningly, and for a moment strobed, flashing blue. My ears rang – and instead of clearing it amplified, sounding like cats rutting, the female

screaming.

The last thing I remember coherently was Peri shouting:

'Doctor!'

I stumbled around – instead of the tree I had my back to a blue

gardener's shed – I thought I had managed to turn myself around in all of my flailing and stumbling, that wasn't what happened but it made more sense as an explanation than a time-travelling space ship come to save us. I'm getting ahead of myself. Right then, at that moment, a man stood in the doorway, though the way my head was

spinning it could easily have been a blond-wigged clown so

flamboyant was his suit of many colours.

'Come on!' the clown yelled, or Peri, or any of the rest of the

survivors. I didn't have the wherewithal to argue. I stumbled

backwards into the shed and collapsed.

Someone dragged me out of the way.

Somehow everyone fitted inside that tiny shed– only it wasn't

tiny. That was the last thing I thought as I blacked out. It wasn't small enough.

Day Eleven

I woke up in a hospital – or thought I did. There were beds and all the paraphernalia of a sick bay, but no windows.

I wasn't alone.

Seven of the other survivors from our office block were in there

with me. They had taken a beating from the Infected – Carlson by

far the worst of it. He was barely recognisable, his face a mess of cuts

and bruises where they had fallen upon him after he had

brought down his brother. Seeing him lying there unconscious, I

remembered what the voice had said about blood passing on the

infection. Was he infected? Was I? I felt my own wounds. My face

felt like it had been used as a ball in the local derby, and kicked all across the park. My throat felt raw but at least I wasn't coughing.

They had hooked me up to some kind of intravenous drip.

I pulled the needle out.

The others all had the same needles hooked into them. We looked

like something out of a bacterial nightmare.

I crawled out of my bed and went looking for the others.

Everything was hospital white, corridor after corridor of it, and no windows.

'Hello?' I called out, feeling like an idiot even as I did. The place was an enormous labyrinth. In the middle of the vast maze, I broke down into a series ofwracking coughs. My throat was parched. I

couldn't remember the last time I had taken on water. 'Hello?' I

called again, and started coughing almost immediately.

Peri found me wandering around in my hospital gown. She

smiled as she saw me. She had a great smile. After everything we

had been through it was hard to explain why such a little thing as a warm smile meant so much right then, but it was something normal

in a world that right up until then had lacked any normality. She put on her bravest face and ducked beneath my shoulder, leading me

along the corridors explaining that the Doctor had taken us to the sick bay and was running all sorts of tests on our blood, trying to isolate whatever it was that caused the sickness in us or, more

precisely, caused us to resist it.

I touched the side of my face tentatively. I couldn't bring myself to ask. I knew. I started coughing again.

'How long?'

It was like waiting to hear my own death sentence pronounced.

My life flashed before my eyes – not in a last-minute blur but in a drawn-out anguish of *these are all the things I am about to lose*: my wife, Allie and her Greek good looks, our daughter, Sammi, even

the dog. All of it, even my stupid job, suddenly mattered so much. It was Christmas. I just wanted to go home and sit beneath the tree

and roast mince pies and eat marshmallows and sing stupid carols.

How long until I die? How long until this Doctor of yours finds a cure? She didn't have an answer. She pushed open a door and led

me through to a room that looked like it was the hub of this peculiar hospital. The others were there, huddled on the floor in the classic broken poses of refugees who had just lost the world. They looked up at me, then seemed to press back into the wall as though my

mere presence would contaminate them – and perhaps it would.

The clown was in the centre of the room, talking to himself as he ran around an octagonal pedestal, either shouting in triumph or

punching the console in frustration – his emotions shifted that

erratically.

'Doctor?' Peri said.

The clown looked up, looked me up and down, grunted and went

back to staring at some kind of readout on the console.

'They are waking up, Doctor.'

'Good, good. Yes. I'm this close!' He held his fingers up, about

an eighth of an inch between thumb and forefinger. I had no way of knowing if that was close or a million subatomic particles away.

And then he saw me, and his demeanour shifted completely. He gave up on whatever he was doing and came to check me over, eyes, ears and throat. He tutted and nodded and asked: ‘Sore throat? Woozy?’

I nodded. He nodded back.

‘How long do you think you’ll last?’

Which was exactly what I had asked, and not what I had expected to hear from the man I had come to think of as a potential saviour. That one line sucked what little strength I had left right out of me. He saw it immediately.

‘No, no, what I mean is: how long do you think you can hold out before I administer the vaccine. The longer you can give me the better chance I have of studying the pathogen.’

‘I’m not going to die?’

‘Good grief, no. Didn’t you hear my message? No one is. It’s a sickness. Any sickness is treatable. I can cure you now, I’m not worried about that I’m worried about the hundreds of thousands of people out there, deeper in the grip of the sickness. The pathogen mutates the longer it is inside the body. That is to say any cure administered at this stage would not be effective as the sickness takes hold. I am asking you to think of the others out there. You are stage one, sore throat, itchy eyes, slightly nauseous. You’re still in the grip of all of your faculties. What will cure you now will not save more than a fifth of the people out there.’ The Doctor shrugged. ‘I need you to get sicker. We need to treat this exactly as it was caused. Will you trust me?’

‘I don’t see what choice I have,’ I said, another series of coughs wracking my body.

I slumped against the side of the console.

I caught myself.

‘Do you know what it is?’

‘A Christmas gift,’ the Doctor said. ‘Gift in the most curious

sense of the word. Did you know in some Scandinavian cultures

“gift” means both married and poison?’

‘I didn’t.’ His leaps of conversation were already beginning to

strain my fragile mind. ‘A gift?’

‘A poison,’ the Doctor said. The thing you call the Christmas Star is a comet. Its orbit intersects with that of Earth every two

millennia.’

‘So it didn’t herald the birth of Christ?’

‘Oh, it might well have,’ the Doctor said, ‘I’ve really no idea, but during its passage it has accumulated huge amounts of the strange matter of the universe. Coming into contact with the earth’s

atmosphere has acted as a catalyst for something within that strange matter.’

‘The rain,’ I said, understanding a little. I had been right. It had all begun with the rain. This plague had come down from the

heavens. The same stars we strove to reach had brought their own

contamination to our doorstep. We were not prepared and could not defend ourselves from sicknesses we could not understand.

The man nodded.

And as he did my legs buckled.

‘Doctor!’ Peri said, catching me as I fell. Between them they

carried me back to my bed in the sick bay. I slipped in and out of coherence as they spoke between them, Peri arguing that I was

suffering and had to be helped now, the Doctor arguing for the

greater good of the others out there.

I tried to tell them I was prepared to suffer if they promised they could save me once I lost everything and became one of the

Infected. I don't know if they heard me or understood me or if I

even managed to say the words. They buckled me into the bed with

wrist and ankle harnesses so I couldn't hurt them as I descended. I tried to talk, to beg and to explain as my faculties left me. I heard that same low keening moan coming out of my mouth and knew,

with detached fascination, that I was gone. It had happened so

quickly.

I wasn't alone.

I understood that immediately as I sensed Carlson's grief. Images of his brother assailed my mind as though we were joined by some

mental stream, or pains shared mind to mind. And I shared his grief, as though it had been my own flesh and blood cut down out there.

They were all there, in this river of consciousness, all of the

Infected. I could touch them all, but so vast was their hunger and their anger and their fear that I pulled back from them.

It didn't help.

I lost myself to that maddening stream, swept away with the

blood and the hate. I wrenched my body against its bonds but

couldn't break them. With a clarity born of hunger I looked up at the Doctor and saw the clown for what he was. I wanted to tear his throat out with my teeth.

'Help him, Doctor!' beggd Peri, sweet gullible Peri.

‘Yes,’ I slurred. ‘Help me, Doctor. Unfasten these buckles so I

can feed. I hunger, Doctor. I can feel it inside me, this madness, and it needs feeding. So feed me, Doctor. Feed me your delightful Peri.

I would eat her first.’ My grin was cruel. But it wasn’t me. I knew enough to be horrified inside as this new me hungered for the

woman who had brought me so close to salvation.

The Doctor used some kind of probe against the side of my skull,

nodded to himself and administered an injection that left me reeling before falling unconscious. It was a different unconsciousness

though, one I shared with the Infected out there. Because of the

river of madness we shared, I was able to see through their eyes as they looked up to the sky at the blazing comet called the Christmas Star and at the strange flashing blue light that flitted across the horizon seemingly blinking in and out of existence to the

caterwauling shrieks of rutting torn cats.

I did not understand what I saw. Not at first. But then, in the

depths of the hunger to feed on flesh, his words came back to me

and I knew he was giving them their lives back.

And where the blue light flashed white powder fell from the sky,

catching in the air and drifting, dissipating on the wind.

Through their eyes I saw the Doctor on rooftops, throwing the

white powder to the wind, on bridges dumping it into the water, and in the deepest deliriums of their shared visions, clinging to the side of the curious blue garden shed that somehow managed to fly.

But as they breathed in the airborne cure our shared vision

faltered.

Day Twelve

On the twelfth day of Christmas I was sick enough for the Doctor to give me the cure.

I don't remember much about the hours I stopped being myself. I

wish I could say the same for Carlson. He came back but his mind

remained out there in the river of those poisoned dreams. He looked at me, saw that I was myself again even though we had shared the

madness at the last, and could not cope with the fact that a few days would have bought his brother's life. He wouldn't be the last victim of the zombie plague – how many other men would wake from the

miasma of that dream state to realise what they had done to their own flesh and blood? Who could live with tasting their own? It

didn't matter that they were out of their minds...

They offered to take me home but I was too frightened to face it.

I sat in the sick bay, my arms wrapped around my knees, thinking

again tha1 this was the way the world ended, not with a bang but

with the low keening moan of loss.

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But I was wrong.

Peri took me to the door, and I looked out of the TARDIS and

saw the fine coating of white everywhere, filling the sky like

snowflakes falling imperfectly. I saw children playing in the streets like nothing had happened, laughing as they snatched at the white flakes. I understood what she was trying to show me but I didn't

care; beyond them, I saw the bodies. That image gave the lie to the seeming joy. People moved about on clean-up duty, trying to make

the city look like our home again. Because that is what we do, we pretend, we carry on.

It hit me as I stepped out: if they were alive, Allie and Sammi

would be looking for me.

I had no choice.

I had to go home.

I had to find them. And if they weren't there I had to live with it.

I had to do what Tyler and Carlson couldn't. I had to go on.

I made my farewells to the clown who called himself the Doctor

and held Peri close for a moment, enjoying that little humanity after so much wrongness.

My house was way out in the hills beyond the city. It took me

hours to run through the streets. Fears riddled my mind. They

wouldn't be there. They would be, dead in the yard. I saw all the fates imaginable and knew I wouldn't be able to live with half of them.

I needed my girls.

When I got there I saw the flickering candlelight in the window,

and the tree with its tinsel and cheap decorations. For a moment that was all I saw and my heart stopped beating. I just stood there staring at the empty window, my world at an end. And then my wife and

daughter came to stand beside the tree, staring out of the window toward the darkness that hid my approach. I watched them for the

longest time. I could see Allie talking, telling our little girl

something. She pointed up at the sky. I followed the direction of her finger and saw the Christmas Star dwindling for another two

millennia.

The world wouldn't end.

Not while there were homes left for us to go back to.

I didn't have a present – at least not one in a box that could be unwrapped. This once, it didn't matter. There would be more

presents, more Christmases, more trees and lights and tacky

wrapping paper. There would be more of all of it.

Going home, I smiled for the first time in a fortnight.

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Keeping it Real

Joseph Lidster

An Adventure of the Fifth Doctor, with Tegan

You know, I'm not really a big Christmas person. Yeah, at least try and look surprised! But you want to know about the maddest

Christmas I had? Oh, yes, I can tell you all about that.

It was back when I was travelling with the Doctor. There'd been

me, him and Turlough. You remember I told you about Turlough?

Alien schoolboy. Moody. Ginger. So, yeah, the three of us had gone to this planet called Frontios. It was millions of years into the future and there were these human colonists under attack by giant alien

woodlice called Tractators. Me and the Doctor had taken their

leader, the Gravis, to a planet called Kolkokron, leaving Turlough behind. Only, we then got distracted because, surprise surprise, we didn't land on Kolkokron. Instead we ended up meeting these semi-intelligent armadillos and saving them from certain destruction.

Yeah, we did that a lot. So, we'd dropped off the woodlouse and the armadillos and we were heading back to Frontios to pick up alien

schoolboy Turlough. Got all that?

Right, so the Doctor was doing his usual rush-around-the-

console-trying-to-look-busy thing and I was trying not to look

impressed. The last thing I wanted was for him to realise that I

actually thought he was pretty great. That isn't me, at all.

So, yeah, heading back to Frontios when suddenly this high-

pitched alarm sounded. The Doctor looked at me and said there was

going to be a ‘slight delay’ in collecting Turlough. Now it wasn’t that I particularly liked the guy but I’d got used to him being

around. So naturally I argued a bit but then the Doctor told me that it was a distress signal, so we’d have to go and investigate and save whoever it was who was in trouble. And, yeah, we did that a lot as well. He ran to the other side of the console, pressed a bunch of switches and slammed us down onto this planet’s surface.

Apparently we were still in the same time zone, millions of years into the future, but instead of the dusty hellhole that was Frontios, 262

we were on a dusty hellhole called Salient Point. At least that’s what the Doctor told me.

Which is why, when we left the TARDIS, it wasn’t such a huge

surprise to find ourselves knee-deep in snow and staring through a blizzard at some olde-worlde English village. I just gave the Doctor a stare and he shrugged and said that the coordinates were right. So, not that I needed to impress him or anything like that, I looked up at the sky and saw that the stars didn’t match what we could see from Earth. Just whack a hat on me and call me Sherlock. So, I said, if this is the dusty hellhole and it’s dearly not Earth then what we were looking at was some kind of illusion, right?

He shook his head and said that perhaps we were actually looking

at the colony itself.

‘But why would it look so old-fashioned?’ he wondered.

‘Because it looks nice?’ I suggested.

‘Nice is good. Come on, Tegan,’ he said, traipsing across towards the village.

So, I followed him through the snow. After a few minutes, I

realised that we weren’t cold. That wasn’t such a surprise for him, obviously. I mean, he might have looked like this English, blond

cricketer guy but he was actually the President of the Mystical Time Lords and had two hearts and thought nothing of changing his face or taking us to the end of the universe. So, yeah, he didn’t really feel the cold. But me? Well, you know me. I’m not one to complain but if I’d

been cold he'd have known about it.

'You're uncharacteristically quiet, Tegan,' he said.

'I'm just wondering why we're not cold,' I replied as we

struggled through the blizzard.

'The snow's made of paper,' he replied before grinning. 'Paper

snow!'

Yeah, great. Millions of years into the future, fighting giant

woodlice, saving sentient armadillos, answering distress signals at the end of time and he got excited about paper snow. Typical.

So, we got to the village and it was deserted. Nobody. Not even a mouse. We stood in the village square and looked at all the

buildings and that. There was a church and a baker's and a pub and all the usual things you'd expect. The Doctor asked me what period I reckoned they were all from. I reminded him that I was an air

stewardess and not a historian, so he told me that the houses were a mismatch of styles. Edwardian, Victorian, all sorts. I couldn't see why that was remotely important and was about to tell him this

when suddenly these church bells started ringing. I mean, it had

been silent up until then so it was a bit of a shock. We just stood, 263

totally still, glancing at each other and I had a ridiculous urge to hold his hand. And if you tell anyone else that bit, I'll kill you. So, we were standing there, listening to these bells when, suddenly,

people started to appear. Oh, no, not like out of thin air or anything!

They just started coming out of the shops and houses and that.

Hundreds of them. And, let's just say that they didn't exactly look like the colonists we'd left behind on Frontios.

'What era do you think their clothes come from?' asked the

Doctor.

‘I don’t know. Victorian? Edwardian?’ I replied. With a sigh.

‘Yes. And yes. And Georgian and Elizabethan and even a bit of

Martian,’ he said. Grinning.

‘So, they’ve got it wrong?’ I pointed out.

‘Oh, they’ve got it all wrong,’ he agreed.

‘You’ll probably get on great with them then,’ I said. Grinning.

‘Thank you, Tegan,’ he replied. With a sigh.

Oh, I was only teasing him. But, yeah, he did have a habit of

getting things wrong. Coordinates, dates, dress sense. So, we were standing there and the people were all milling about. Carrying

baskets and wearing hats and bonnets and talking to each other. One woman saw us and came over. She was very... happy. Rosy cheeks,

laughter lines, the lot. The Doctor started to introduce us to her but she just cut across him.

‘Happy Christmas!’ she proclaimed, rather over-dramatically.

‘Joy to the world. Joy! Joy!’

I behaved myself. I resisted the urge to slap her and gave her my practised stewardess smile.

‘Happy Christmas,’ I replied. ‘Can you tell us where we are?’

But she ignored me. Just walked off. I started after her. I wasn’t going to have a go or anything but there was no need to be so rude.

But, then, the Doctor held me back.

‘Listen,’ he said.

‘To what?’ I asked.

‘To... them,’ he whispered.

He liked to be needlessly dramatic at moments like that. But, as

we listened, we could hear them all talking. And, you know how I

said they were chatting to each other? Well, they weren't. Well, not normally. They were all just muttering on about Christmas and joy 1o the world and everything. And as we were listening, they all

started repeating the word 'joy' over and over again. God, it was annoying. And it was getting louder.

'JOY! JOY! JOY!'

And then, suddenly, they all stopped. All of them. They all just

stopped and stood still and went silent. The Doctor took my hand

and said he thought we should head back to the TARDIS. But it was too late. We were surrounded. And they were staring right at us. I carefully crouched down and took off my shoe. Well, I wasn't

going to go down without a fight! So we were stood there, watching them watching us. And they slowly, deliberately, all moved into

some kind of formation. I mean, I'd seen everything with the

Doctor. Really... everything. But this was simply mad. And just

when I thought it couldn't get any madder, they all took a step

towards us.

'Happy Christmas!' they all said, staring at us with their wide

eyes and grinning at us with their wide mouths. It was truly

terrifying.

And then they started to sing.

No! Don't laugh! It wasn't funny! It was... well, all right, it was a bit funny, I guess. They just started this big song-and-dance routine like you see in films. People moving to the left. Others moving to the right. Men at the back. Women at the front. Urchins prancing

about all over the place. Jazz hands. Eyes and teeth. Chucking each other everywhere. And all to the tune of *Ding Dong Merrily On High*. You know, the one with the really long 'Glooooooooria' bit.

So to give them their due, the villagers had managed to go from

rude to creepy to terrifying to completely smackable in the space of a few minutes. I suggested to the Doctor that we should try and

back away but he was having none of it.

‘There’s something I want to wait for,’ he said. ‘Or someone.’

‘What now?’ I asked. Keeping my voice calm. Oh, yes, so very

calm.

‘Look at the way they’re dancing.’ He pointed to a gap in the

middle of the vibrating villagers. ‘They’re just the chorus!’

And that’s when *he* appeared.

What can I tell you about him? Tall. Pretty scrawny. Unshaven.

Dark skin. I think the kids today would call him ‘fit’. Yeah, I liked him. He was standing in the middle of everyone else and he was

clearly ‘the star’. He started to sing by himself with the others all giving it ‘Glooooooooooria’ and kneeling in front of him like he was some kind of god. Which he might have been for all I knew. And I

noticed, as well, that he wasn’t dressed like the others. They were all in these old-fashioned stupid dresses but he was in a uniform that looked pretty similar to what the colonists on Frontios had been

wearing. I pointed this out to the Doctor.

‘Well spotted, Tegan,’ he replied. I don’t think he meant to sound 265

patronising.

And, as we watched, the song finished. They all held their

positions and I wondered if we were meant to clap or something. I shook my hand free from the Doctor’s and kind of gave a half-hearted round of applause. The villagers, grinning, all just started to return to their... villaging. Shopping, talking, wishing each other

‘Merry Christmas’ – and the guy remained where he was, looking at us. After about a minute, the Doctor gently called over, saying

hello. The man suddenly looked terrified and ran off The Doctor was about to go after him when I stopped him.

'Doctor,' I said. 'Clearly, there's some kind of illusion thing going on here, yeah?'

'Of course,' he replied.

'So, why don't you search for whatever's causing it and I'll talk to the mystery man?'

He looked at me, concerned. Bless him. And before he could start breathlessly going on about 'unknown danger', I ran off after the man.

A few minutes later, I found him. He was hiding down some alleyway between two cottages.

'Hi, I'm Tegan,' I said.

'Vivash,' he replied. 'Vivash O'Connell. Happy Christmas.'

He looked both nervous and excited. Kind of how I felt every time I was about to step out of the TARDIS. I kept walking towards him. Slowly. Carefully. His breathing slowed back to normal as he started to calm down.

'You're new here, aren't you?' he asked. I nodded as he stood up.

'Sorry,' he said, walking towards me with a hand outstretched. 'We don't get many visitors here and you kind of took me by surprise.'

'No worries,' I replied, shaking his hand.

He seemed to be calmer now. The initial shock had passed and he seemed... normal.

'So,' he continued. 'Are you my Christmas present?'

Obviously, I wasn't quite sure how to take that. At first, you know, I

wondered if he was... well, you know, coming on to me. But then he started to babble on about Salient Point. He started telling me all about the village and how they were having a great Christmas.

Everyone was having a fantastic time and they were so pleased that it had snowed because that made it more magical, didn't it? The

thing was, he didn't look mad. I mean, I couldn't be certain but he just didn't seem crazy. And as I stood there, trying to work out what 266

to do, he invited me to a carol concert.

'It's at the church tonight. Everyone's going!'

'I... well, I'd love to,' I replied. Trying to keep him on side.

'Yeah,' he continued, grinning. 'Even Old Mr Scrooge is going to

be there!'

Okay. So I'd thought he wasn't crazy but clearly I'd been wrong.

Hey, it happens sometimes! I was starting to regret following him now. He was obviously completely unaware that he was trapped in

some kind of all-singing, all-dancing Christmas illusion and I

considered whether I should break it to him gently. But then I

remembered something my Aunty Vanessa had always said. 'A

kangaroo punch is better than a slow puncture.' No, I don't know

what she was on about either but I decided that it'd be best to rip off the plaster. No use prolonging the pain.

'Erm, Vivash?' I started. 'Salient Point. This village. Christmas.

None of it is –'

WOOMPH!

And I stopped. I stopped because a huge turkey had just landed in the snow in front of me.

Now, when I say 'huge', I mean huge. The thing was the size of a

car. If it had landed on me, I wouldn't be here now. So I looked up

and saw someone leaning out of a window above us. It was a grubby-faced kid. ‘Begging your pardon, miss,’ he said, all very chirpy. ‘Didn’t mean to nearly crush you to death or anything.’

Before I could answer back, Vivash looked up at the kid.

‘Oi, Tiny Tim! Be careful, yeah!’

The kid winked then went back inside.

I tried to stay calm. Really, I did. But it was all getting a bit too much. I could feel the hackles starting to rise!

‘Look, Vivash. This place. Your Christmas?’

He looked at me warily. ‘What about it?’

‘It isn’t re–’

WOOMPH!

Another turkey landed in front of me. Closer this time. I noticed that even though it was smoking, fresh from an oven, it didn’t really smell of anything.

‘Sorry, miss!’ called Tiny Tim from above us. ‘I’m just so excited about Christmas and I’d hate for anything to spoil it.’

So, yeah, message received and understood. Don’t tell Vivash that he was living in dreamland.

‘You know, Vivash?’ I said. ‘I’d love to come to your carol concert. There’s nothing else in the universe I’d rather do.’

‘Joy!’ he replied.

‘Joy indeed,’ I muttered. ‘Can I bring a friend? The man who I came here with.’

‘Of course!’ he nodded. ‘I want all my present, not just half of it!’

So, I took his arm in mine and we walked back through the village.

I was surprised at how scrawny his arm felt through his uniform. I realised he was obviously starving which is why he hadn't managed to run very far. Then I remembered how the turkey that had landed in front of me hadn't smelt of turkey. Clearly, the food here wasn't real either. The people weren't real. The food wasn't real. The snow wasn't real. I wasn't sure about the buildings. I was pretty sure that Vivash was real but the one thing that I knew for definite was real was the Doctor.

I called out to him as we pushed through the villagers. A bunch of them had given up their shopping and their 'Merry Christmas'-ing

and had started to build some snowmen in the middle of the village square. At least they seemed to be enjoying themselves. Vivash

wanted to run over and join them bu1 I suggested that we find the Doctor first. I started to shout through the paper blizzard, calling for the Doctor. There was no answer, of course. He'd probably already been caught by Cybermen or the Master or whatever had created all this. I started to panic slightly. I was trapped, millions of years into the future on some alien planet in the middle of some Christmas

fantasy. If I said out loud that it wasn't real, I knew I'd have another turkey falling on me so, I figured, how long before I became like Vivash and started to believe it all myself? How long before I

started to let myself starve to death while believing that I was

having 'the best Christmas ever'?

And, as I held Vivash up and watched the villagers prancing

around us, I really began to feel like crying. I just wanted to be back home.

But this is me. Tegan Jovanka. And I don't cry. So, I led Vivash to a bench, brushed off the paper and we sat down. And I thought

about it. Me and the Doctor hadn't seen anything outside of the

village. So that meant he was in the village or he'd gone back to the TARDIS. He wouldn't even dare consider going back to the

TARDIS without me, so that meant he was in the village. The place

was small enough that he'd have heard me calling, so he was obviously trapped somewhere. I looked around the various buildings. There must have been about nine or ten and he could have been in any of them. But who was holding him? Most of the villagers were there in the square. Talking and building their snowmen... the snowmen!

I jumped to my feet and ran over, calling for the Doctor. And, sure enough, I heard him reply. Muffled. Gasping for air. Calling my name. Before the villagers could stop me, I launched myself at the nearest paper snowman. I grabbed the pieces of coal they'd used for its eyes and chucked them away. Underneath, the Doctor's eyes stared back at me. 'Get me out of here!' he squealed, his voice still muffled.

I resisted the urge to laugh and quickly started to brush the paper snow away. As more and more of it came loose, he shrugged the rest of it off him and stepped free.

'Are you okay, Doctor?' I asked, really trying not to laugh at how indignant he looked.

'They attacked me! I just happened to say that –'

I held a finger to his lips. 'Yeah, I know. I know and you know and I think they know but we don't want to spoil Christmas, now do we?'

He nodded. 'Did you find the mystery man?'

I led him over to the bench. Vivash was lying down now, exhausted. 'He's starving,' I told the Doctor. 'And I'm pretty certain he's real.'

The Doctor knelt down and examined Vivash. The man's eyes flickered open and he smiled, weakly.

‘Happy Christmas,’ he muttered.

The Doctor smiled back at him and stood up. He glanced back at

the villagers who were now surrounding us, holding up their bread-filled baskets menacingly. Then he leant in to me, real close, and started to whisper into my ear.

‘There’s a giant food-replicating machine in the church. It’s

created all this.’

I mouthed the word ‘why’ at him.

‘I’m guessing it’s for our friend’s benefit.’ He glanced down at

Vivash. I knelt down, brushed the hair out of Vivash’s face and

asked him to look at me. He opened his eyes again and tried to

focus on my face.

‘Hi,’ he whispered.

‘Vivash, do you know what’s going on?’

He nodded. ‘It’s Christmas. Every day.’

I smiled at him, trying to be reassuring. ‘But that’s not possible, is it?’

‘Ssh, you’re not meant to know.’

And then I realised. I stood up and turned back to the Doctor. ‘He thinks we’re his Christmas presents.’

‘You mean he knows?’

‘Exactly! He knows that none of this is... you know. And he

thinks we’re not... you know. He thinks we’re part of it.’

Vivash started to sit up, looking at us angrily. ‘What are you

doing?’

‘We’re not part of your fantasy,’ I said, shaking my head.

‘But I thought… I thought you were going to take me away?’

And as I looked at the Doctor, Vivash started to cry. The Doctor put his hand on the man’s shoulder.

‘It’s all right, I’m the Doctor. And I’m real.’

Vivash shook his shoulder free and glared up at us.

‘Well, thanks, Doctor. You just broke Christmas.’

And me and the Doctor sat down on either side of Vivash as he explained what had happened. Everyone had died. He’d been on a ship like the one that had gone to Frontios – the last of the human race, desperate to survive the end of the world. The ship he’d been on had crashed and the crew and colonists had died. He’d been the only survivor. Terrified, he’d created the village using the onboard matter replication array so he wouldn’t be alone in the darkness.

He’d remembered how much he’d loved Christmas as a kid and had been desperate to relive it and he had made sure that nothing would ever spoil it. But he hadn’t realised the downside. Too busy creating the illusion, the replicating machine was unable to perform the function it was designed for: feeding the crew. And Vivash coudn’t stop it. When he’d seen me and the Doctor, he’d figured we were just part of the ship’s illusion. His dream of being taken to a real Christmas. The Doctor didn’t understand. He couldn’t get why someone would choose to live in a fantasy rather than try to do something about the situation. Vivash tried to answer but was too weak. So, I turned to the Doctor.

‘That’s Christmas,’ I said. ‘It doesn’t matter what else is happening in your life, it’s the one time of year when you just don’t want to be alone. It’s the one time of year that you try and put everything else to one side and just… have a bit of fun.’

The Doctor nodded. ‘Vivash?’

‘Doctor?’

‘Happy Christmas.’ The Doctor smiled as he stood up. ‘We’re not

part of the illusion. I’m real. Tegan is very real. And we can take you away. Really.’

‘Mate,’ I laughed. ‘We really are your Christmas present!’

And we helped him to his feet and led him back to the TARDIS.

And so we sat there in the control room, eating turkey and stuffing and cranberry sauce and that. And, you know what, I really enjoyed
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it. The Doctor seemed to let his hair down and was really into it.

Vivash, obviously, hadn’t eaten in ages so was loving every

mouthful – even the sprouts. And because they were both having

the time of their lives, I didn’t feel quite so... self-conscious. Yes, I even put on a party hat. And we had Christmas pudding and brandy

butter and mince pies and Christmas cake. And somehow – and I

completely refuse to use the word ‘magically’ – the Doctor even

had presents for all of us. And then me and Vivash dozed in a

couple of wicker chairs as the Doctor set the coordinates for

Frontios. And it was perfect.

Which is, of course, when the TARDIS console started with another high-pitched beep as it picked up another distress signal.

‘Tegan. Vivash.’ The Doctor sighed, taking off his paper hat.

‘I’m afraid we’re going to have to make a slight detour...’

271

Christmas Every Day?

Mark Magrs

An Adventure of the Seventh Doctor

‘But I have to have one!’

It’s like this all the time.

‘I’ve been everywhere and everywhere’s sold out!’

There’s always something.

Gan you just check the stockroom for me?’

Oh, great – an awkward customer.

‘If it’s not on the shelves, I’m afraid we don’t have it.’ That’s my script and I’m sticking to it.

‘But could you just check?’

Every Christmas is the same. There’s always some new toy, some new bauble, some new accessory that everybody has to have. This time it’s the Visago ChangerTM – a home cosmetic surgery kit for kids.

‘I’m very sorry,’ I say, ‘but it’s the most popular item at this time. We should have new stock arriving before 4am – if you’d care to leave your name and codes…’ My face aches with all the smiling. During our training programmes we’re all taught how to talk and smile at the same time.

‘Tomorrow?’ The shopper is horrified. ‘That’s almost halfway to *next* Christmas!’

‘Is there anything else I can help you with?’ Grinning for twenty hours a day doesn’t half take it out of you. Especially with the awkward ones. The shopper scowls and moves away. They don’t even say goodbye to the likes of me. ‘Have a nice day – and Merry Christmas,’ is what I’m *supposed* to say, but I only manage the first half before the shopper is out of earshot.

The snow falls all around us. We're guaranteed a white Christmas at the Centre. It's the very latest photo-realistic three-dimensional holo-snow –you can't slip on it and it doesn't turn to slush. It falls indoors 24 hours a day and always looks pretty. And as for the

decorations! We have over six hundred miles of tinsel in our

quadrant alone. There are hundreds of jingling bells spinning on a thousand twinkling trees – Mr Sachrin reckons our decorations are the only man-made objects visible from space. Not that the

shoppers appreciate them. They just see what we *don't* have. They come down here, tut and cluck at not being able to find what they want and then clear off. At least they get to see the *outside* of this place.

'Why can't I be a personal shopper?' I'm thinking aloud and

Loubie grins at me. She works at the next sales point and most of the time we're too busy to talk – *especially* on Christmas Eve – but we do get to smile, shrug our shoulders and communicate in

whatever way we can.

'Nobody trusts humans to do it!' Loubie and I have been working

the same shifts for the last couple of months. 'If you get yourself a robo-shopper they can't cheat you – they're not programmed for it.'

'I reckon the sort of people who can afford robo-shoppers

wouldn't notice if somebody lined their own pockets once in a

while.'

'Don't bet on it – the reason the rich are *so* rich is because they count every penny. *Nobody* trusts humans – Sachrin only employs us because we're cheaper than off-worlders.' Loubie nods up

towards the cameras above us. 'Why do you think we've got so

many of them?'

'What about those mecha-cyborg things?' I counter. 'Plenty of

them get Shopper jobs.'

'Risky – didn't one of them go mad in the cine-quadrant?'

'Oh, yeah...' We don't discuss it. Nobody ever discusses it.

I suppose management will change the rotas pretty soon – they

don't like anyone getting to know each other too well. I'll miss

Loubie. I like to imagine that my daughter has grown up to be just like her – funny and chatty but hard-working. My little girl will be nearly twenty now – but our shifts clash so I haven't seen her for nearly five years. She works in the refresh-quadrant and they have big targets to hit; five hundred burgers an hour, so I've heard.

'We don't seem so busy,' Loubie snorts, wanting to talk about

something else. 'I've actually had time to scratch my backside.'

Loubie might have a point – but I hope not. If sales are down they'll start having Christmas *twice* a week – maybe even daily!

'Ho! Ho! Hoooo!' The Centre sleigh rushes past our store front.

It's a huge, red missile, circling around and in between the different levels. Smoke and glitter spew from the engines as Father

Christmas chuckles from his perch. The shoppers look up and wave.

'Six hours until Christmas!' Santa bellows. 'Make sure you have

enough gifts for everyone!' The message is repeated as the sleigh bobs and weaves. 'Remember – the more you give, the more you

care!'

The Centre is a completely self-contained miracle of technology.

We work inside an enormous weather-proof, asteroid-proof, attack-

proof bubble. It's also been really useful since the polar caps

exploded. Of course, the Scots weren't too happy about having to

give up most of their country to make way for the reactors but this

place needs a lot of power to keep things running. The light and the atmosphere are kept constant so it doesn't matter what time you

visit – shopping conditions are always perfect. And there's a

constant stream of shoppers. From our level, the customers on the lower floors look like decorations on the branches of a giant tree.

They swing from store to store, the strip lights reflecting on their shining bags and parcels.

I notice *him* because he's moving slowly and he doesn't wave at Santa. He's wandering from section to section, from aisle to aisle, frowning and tutting as he taps his umbrella on the tiled floor.

'Do you need assistance, sir?' As well as sticking to my script,

I've injected an American twang into my accent–just as Mr Sachrin suggests.

'That remains to be seen.' He doffs his battered hat.

'Is there something special you're looking for?'

'That depends.' He speaks softly, almost in a whisper. 'It's more a case that I'm looking for something for someone special.'

'And does sir have anything in mind?' Stick to the script, I tell myself; don't let his waffle throw you.

'Well, that's a very big question, isn't it?' His face is grave. 'I mean, whatever I have in my mind is probably a lot more unusual

than most people...' Then he breaks into an enormous smile, as if he's just said something very clever indeed. Oh, great. *Another* awkward one. Not only does he look as if he's just escaped from

somewhere – I mean, that *jumper* – but he's talking in riddles. I look to Loubie for help. She's staring at him, too. 'I do know that she likes Charlton Athletic...' He flashes me another smile. 'But I really don't know what to buy for the teenager who *destroys*

everything...'

I look at this little guy – with his chequered trousers and golf

shoes. He's *too* out of place. He could be a mystery shopper –

designed to catch me out. I glance sideways at Loubie and she nods.

‘Badges!’ He grins. ‘Lots and lots of badges!’ He skulks off

towards a display, running his fingers excitedly through rows of

designer punk patches and buttons.

‘His results came through!’ Loubie hisses in my ear. ‘He’s

organic–one hundred per cent organic! And he’s not carrying any

money!’ We don’t get many organics in the sales-quadrant. Most

customers send their androids to do their queuing for them.

‘Check it,’ I say, ‘do the scan again.’

‘I already have.’ Loubie shows me the results. ‘The guy’s broke.

He’s only carrying a few scraps of old coins, all worthless – no

legal tender.’

‘He’s either staff, mad, or an insurgent from the north.’ I don’t know what’s worse. The northerners are said to be holed up in the wreck of some cathedral – but they have been known to head south

– looking for alcohol. ‘Hit the button,’ I say to Loubie, ‘get security down here.’

‘But what if he’s a mystery shopper?’

‘We follow procedure,’ I remind her, ‘he’s an organic behaving

suspiciously – we’ll kick it upstairs, let them sort it out.’ Loubie hurries back to her sales point. I see her reach for the hidden alarm switch.

‘I do have one question.’ He’s right beside me! He’s moved so

quickly and so quietly that he must’ve heard everything I’ve just said. ‘How long have you worked here?’ It’s a strange question –

but it’s just the sort of thing a mystery shopper *might* ask. We’ve been warned about this – we could be asked about ourselves, the

Centre, policies, special offers, anything.

'Ever since we first opened.' They use mystery shoppers to make sure the induction programmes work.

'And how long has that been?' Surely everybody knows about this place? He *must've* seen the websites or the proj-casts. Unless he has been living in the dark under Durham.

'It's been exactly 21 years and eight months since our Grand Opening–it was a star-studded event, featuring –'

'Why?' He cuts me off. He suddenly seems taller – almost as if he's towering over me as he speaks.

'Excuse me?'

'This place – all of these shops and side shows and places to eat – why is it here?'

'The Centre,' I take a deep breath, ready to trot out the corporate info, 'was designed to regenerate an area of serious economic deprivation following the collapse of the UK...'

'Hmmmm...' He hooks the red handle of his umbrella into the top pocket of his coat and clasps his hands behind his back.

'... since that time, the Centre has made sure that the entire

population of the UK has enjoyed one hundred per cent employment!' I breathe out with relief. I think I remembered the most important bits.

'You mean to tell me that the whole country is now just one big *shop*?' He seems to be amused and appalled at the same time.

‘Of course not!’ I really hope he is a mystery shopper. Otherwise I’m wasting my time. ‘We have cinemas, bowling alleys, holo-death-decks, over four hundred different restaurants... People have far more choice!’

‘But *you* – can you *choose* to work somewhere else?’

‘Why would I want to?’

‘Well, this place is open 24 hours a day, 365 days a year– I’d

imagine it’s rather difficult to take any time off...’

‘We’re open when you need us!’

‘But when do *you* take a day off?’

‘I’m sorry?’

‘A day off? Don’t you ever have a Bank Holiday? A short break?

Annual leave? A long weekend? A lie-in?’ I haven’t got a clue what he’s on about. ‘And you don’t take any time off for Christmas?’

‘It’s Christmas once a week!’

‘Once a *week*?’ He really is getting exasperated. I hope those security gorillas show up soon.

‘We’ve had Christmas once a week since the Centre opened!

Even if we wanted a day off, we don’t have the time!’ I’m

forgetting to call him ‘sir’.

‘But everybody is supposed to have a day off at Christmas! It’s

the one time of the year when everybody gets together, eats too

much, drinks too much and watches repeats of *The Morecambe and Wise Show*!’

‘What century are you from?’ Blast it – I’m off the script. He’s

talking so fast that my head’s spinning.

‘All of them,’ he murmurs, ‘and none of them.’ He drums on his

lips with his fingers and stares at me. ‘And everybody does this?’

He waves an arm towards the neon lighting and fake snow.

‘Everybody who can afford to,’ I say. ‘Shop til you drop till

Christmas – then three days of sales – Wednesday is chocolate egg day – then it’s back to the Christmas rush!’

But if every day is a special occasion,’ he looks puzzled, ‘then no day can be truly...’

‘Special?’

‘Exactly,’ he sighs.

‘Following extensive market research,’ I say, trying to get back

on message, it was decided that the two activities that make most 276

people happy are Christmas and shopping. So we now have

Christmas once a week!’

‘But you couldn’t choose to go away, to get out of this place, to see your family and friends?’

‘There really would be no point – *everybody* works here –

everybody works the same shifts.’

‘But how often do you *choose* to do something? Do you choose to work here? Do you choose to celebrate Christmas once a week?

Do you choose to live without friends? Without *family*?’ His face crumples. He looks lost, forlorn. ‘What choices do you have? Did

you make a decision when you told your friend to sound the alarm?

Could you choose not to turn me in? You could be the first – the

first person to really make a choice in this dreadful place.’ He looks up, towards the domed ceiling – just as Santa’s sleigh makes

another pass. ‘Choose to be one single stone–just one stone thrown into this stagnant pool will cause ripples to spread across the surface

– you can choose to change all of this...’

A black gloved hand appears at his elbow. Security.

‘Thank you,’ the little man says. He takes a watch from his

pocket. ‘Less than three minutes – that’s very good!’ He turns to the two hulking monsters behind him – Centre security aren’t exactly

known for their finesse. ‘I’m sure your boss will be very proud of your efficiency!’

‘You can tell him – when you see him.’ The two security guards

grunt and lift him off his feet.

‘And you –’ the wider of the two looks at me ‘– Mr Sachrin

wants to thank you in person.’

‘That’s really not necessary,’ I splutter. ‘I should probably stay here in case we get a rush of last-minute –’

‘That’s not a request!’

I follow behind as the mystery shopper is dragged towards the

nearest lift.

Mr Sachrin doesn’t shake our hands. He doesn’t offer us a seat

either. He’s shorter than I expected, but his suit looks just as

expensive as I thought it would.

‘Now,’ he says, standing with his back to a ridiculously large

window. ‘I’m sure we can sort this misunderstanding out…’ The

view behind him is spectacular. We are at the highest point of the Centre. The sheer amount of steel, glass and other shiny materials is really quite amazing. I can even make out the tall flames on the

generators in the far north.

‘Misunderstanding?’ The mystery man smiles. ‘I’ve been waiting

a long time to meet you!’

‘I’ve seen the report,’ Sachrin says smoothly. ‘You entered our premises without sufficient funds…’

‘Oh, I see – you don’t want customers who don’t have any money! Well, why didn’t you say so?’

‘You must understand, Mr…?’

‘Doctor.’

‘It’s not all about money, Doctor.’ Sachrin smiles. ‘I pride myself on being a *people* person.’

‘Well, your Centre certainly *uses* a lot of people…’

‘Exactly! Human beings are a vitally important part of our success… We guarantee full employment and opportunity for all! Even you, Doctor!’

‘Do you call working 24 hours a day in a glorified supermarket an opportunity?’

‘Every individual has to play a part in society, and they receive their rewards. Food, clothing, warmth. We even provide free prescriptions – to make sure that people stay healthy, alert – and able to work.’ Nobody seems to have remembered that I’m here.

‘But that’s not really fair,’ the Doctor says quietly, ‘since when did slavery and exploitation become government policy?’

‘Government?’ Sachrin replies with a chuckle. ‘What a quaint idea! Governments were a remarkably inefficient way of doing things. All those scandals, wars, *elections*… You wouldn’t believe how much holding a vote slows things down…’

‘And this is where it leads…’ The Doctor waves his arm towards the window. ‘Millions of years of human evolution – thousands of years of culture, society, democracy – and you turn it into one big

shop!'

'Please,' Mr Sachrin says, smiling. 'This Centre is a Commercial

Enterprise Network for Trade, Regeneration and Excellence.'

'You must be so very proud!' the Doctor snorts.

'Action had to be taken! The Centre is a proactive response to

global economic uncertainty.'

'Yes.' The Doctor fixes Sachrin with dark eyes. 'But I've seen

the other side of your retail paradise. I've seen what happens to the people who don't want to stand behind tills or serve food – they're having to make their own way – make their own *choices*...' The Doctor looks at *me*.

'Ah! So, you've met our little band of outcasts. You really

mustn't listen to what people like that have to say...' Sachrin's jaw tightens. 'Criminals.'

'Those people may be your last hope.'

'As if *they* have anything to offer,' Sachrin sneers.

'Oh, they have plenty to offer. Survival instincts, determination, a wonderful sense of humour. Typical humans, in fact. They've

managed to survive in the ruins of a two-thousand-year-old

cathedral. I can't imagine many of your well trained, go-getting, proactive, team-building, forward-thinking sales enablers managing to do that!'

Behind Sachrin, I notice that the flames have died on the power

complex. One of the security guards seems to notice it too.

'Chief!'

Sachrin realises that we are all looking over his shoulder and

turns to peer through the window.

The lights of the Centre are going out. Darkness creeps from the

horizon across the silver arches and towering glass malls. I've never seen anything like it. There have been glitches and power outs in the past– but nothing on this scale. I can see the refresh-quadrant as the lights slowly wink out. It's only about twenty minutes' walk

from here – twenty minutes and I haven't seen my daughter for

nearly five years.

The phone on Sachrin's desk lights up as every single one of his

two hundred lines receives a call at the same time.

'It seems my friends have done their job,' muses the Doctor.

'What?' Sachrin's face is a bright red mixture of rage and

confusion.

'My friends –' the Doctor smiles '– *in the north*. It seems that you might need some help after all...' He turns to me, taking my hands in his.

'What are you doing?' I try to break his grip, but he fixes me with his intense eyes.

'Your *daughter*,' he murmurs, 'loved – *will* love this Christmas.'

He takes a small, exquisitely wrapped gift from his deep jacket

pocket and puts it in my hands. I don't remember telling him

about... 'Go to her.'

The lights in the office go out. Even the ones on Sachrin's phone.

The Centre has been plunged into darkness and silence. Even the

snow has stopped falling. I look down at the parcel in my hands.

My daughter is only twenty minutes away.

'You can't shut us down!' Sachrin's eyes are bulging as he spits

his words at the Doctor.

'I believe I just *did*.'

‘But it’s Christmas!’

‘So take the day off.’ The Doctor grins at me, turns on his heel

and walks out.

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Faithful Friends: Part Three

Cavan Scott & Mark Wright

An Adventure of the Brigadier

He dreamt of an alien world. He was walking through a dense,

tropical jungle, accompanied by someone who felt as familiar as he was strange, all at the same time. The sweat clung to his skin as he carefully pushed past huge, drooping purple leaves and the humid

air weighed heavy in his lungs.

At the back of his mind he knew this had to be a dream. For a

start, one minute he seemed to be serving in a bar, and the next he was here with his unknown friend. That was the bit that was wrong.

He had set foot on alien worlds in the past, of course, but that was the point: in the past. These days it was as much as he could do to set foot in the supermarket. There had been a time when protecting the planet from invasion or finding himself face to face with a new form of creeping terror was all in a day’s work. The evening’s work was the mountains of paperwork and how he had cursed the red tape back then. These days he found that he even missed the endless

reports. The only thing he signed these days was his pension book.

There was no getting away from it. General Sir Alistair Gordon

Lethbridge-Stewart was a dinosaur and the world had moved on.

Funny though, after all these years and promotions and titles, he still thought of himself as a brigadier. The rank where he had been happiest and performed his best work. But now the adventures had

come to an end, for him at least. New names now sat at the bottom of the reports. New voices barking orders. New commanders facing

the monsters.

Greyhound One had finally been sent to the old dogs' home.

The Brigadier was no longer dreaming. He was back in the warmth

of his living room. He shifted slowly in his chair, its faithful frame creaking beneath him. He kept his eyes closed, allowing himself to doze a while longer. He could hear the radio in the kitchen, Bing crooning to an empty room. Doris had always loved Crosby at this

time of year. The house would have been ringing to the sound of

The Little Boy That Santa Claus Forgot. She would have been furious had she thought that come Christmas Day the decorations

were still packed away in a box, but there didn't seem much point decorating the place these days, now he was on his own. Of course, he didn't have to be alone at the festive season. Julius had, as

always, extended the offer for Alistair to join the family, but the journey up to Manchester seemed just a little bit too far these days.

No, this was just the way it was. A man and his memories on

Christmas Day. He didn't want to be a burden.

He ought to be thinking about getting something to eat. His

nostrils twitched as he sa1 there, almos1 awake now. The smell

from the kitchen was certainly making him hungry. Something

smelt divine.

The old man frowned. Smell from the kitchen? What the hell?

Who was cooking?

The Brigadier forced his eyes to open, rubbing them to wipe the

sleep away. When he opened them properly, he found himself

looking at a smiling face.

'Ah, you're awake! And just in time too.'

The man had pulled up one of the dining table chairs so he could sit directly facing the Brigadier. He leant forward expectantly, crumpled paper crown sitting precariously on a mass of tumbling curls. He wore a very fine-looking blue frock coat and had clearly been watching him while he slept.

‘Good lord. It’s you. It’s really you.’

‘We’ve been creeping around like mice,’ said the new arrival, eyes sparkling. ‘Didn’t want to wake you.’

‘Doctor, am I still dreaming?’

‘Not that I know of,’ the Time Lord replied, pushing his chair back and bounding energetically over to the table from which he plucked two glasses of red wine. It was only now that the Brigadier noticed the table had been cleared of the piles of newspapers and books. A pristine tablecloth stretched across its surface, hiding the scratches and scuffs of decades of use, and in front of every chair a place was set, complete with napkin and cracker.

The Doctor walked around the room and offered one of the glasses to his friend. ‘Happy Christmas, Alistair.’

‘You finally came…’

‘That’s just it, Alistair.’ the Doctor explained, plonking back down onto his chair. ‘I was at this party, having a lovely time, and I was just about to dig into the stuffing when I remembered…’

‘Remembered what, Doctor?’

‘Your very kind offer to join you for Christmas dinner. I’m so

dreadfully sorry I’m late, but after a regeneration or five it must have slipped my mind. I very much hope the offer still stands…’

The Brigadier struggled to sit upright. ‘Of course it does. But I haven’t

got a thing in. I was going to pop one of those ready meals in the oven for myself later...'

The Doctor pursed his lips and tutted. 'A ready meal? Shame on

you, Alistair! What would Doris say? I won't hear of it.' The

Doctor bounced up from his chair and the Brigadier wondered if

this one didn't have springs in his feet. 'Besides, it's all taken care of. You just sit there, enjoy your wine and...'

The Brigadier's brow furrowed as the doorbell chimed in the hall.

'Who the devil's that? I wasn't expecting anyone.'

The Doctor glanced over apologetically. 'Actually, you are

rather.'

'Shall I get it?' called a female voice from the hallway.

'Good heavens!'

A beaming face appeared from around the door.

'Bless my soul. It's Miss Pollard, isn't it?'

'Hello, Brigadier. Merry Christmas.'

'Charley, I've told you,' admonished the Doctor. 'It's General

now.'

'Oh, poppycock, Doctor. I much prefer Brigadier. Always have.

Merry Christmas to you too, Miss Pollard.'

Flashing a charming smile, Charley disappeared 1owards the

front door. 'Well, this is a surprise.'

'Oh, the surprises are only just beginning,' grinned the Doctor, as he busied himself around the table. 'Trust me.'

He wasn't lying.

John Benton was the first to arrive, having been dropped off by

his grandson. But they hadn't much time to catch up before the next guest arrived. Osgood walked in, proudly carrying a bottle of

Scotch.

'I know that Corporal Bell always sent you one of these, sir, and I know that she wouldn't want you to go without now that she's

passed away.' The bottle was placed to one side with a promise that they would raise a glass to Bell before the day was out. Liz arrived with Mike Yates, who thanked the Doctor for the loan of Bessie, but claimed that someone really should have a look at her tracking.

Benton joked that, if the Doctor wanted, he knew where he could

pick up a cheap motor. Emily Chaudhry was the last to arrive, and the Brigadier thought she was looking very well indeed. UNIT

couldn't be in safer hands really.

As the Doctor bustled them to their seats, and Charley begin

bringing in a procession of bowls of steaming veg, apologies were made. Winifred and Ancelyn were currently holidaying in Avalon

and Benton said that he'd called Miss Smith but her voicemail

message had said something about being overseas on assignment.

Before long, they were all sat at the table, the Brigadier at its head. As the Doctor began carving the biggest turkey he'd ever

seen, the old soldier noticed the extra place set beside him.

'Are we expecting someone else, Doctor?'

With an exquisite sense of timing the doorbell rang again.

'Oh, we are indeed, Alistair,' he said, and with a wink to Charley almost skipped into the hallway.

Moments later, the Brigadier's mouth dropped open once more as

his last guest walked into the room.

‘My word,’ he breathed out quietly, unable to hide the tear that

glistened in the comer of his eye.

Jo Grant placed a kiss on his cheek, before taking her place at his side. ‘Sorry, I’m late, Brigadier. My flight was delayed. It’s murder flying on Christmas Day.’

‘I told you I could pick you up on the way, Jo,’ the Doctor said, now returning to his job of carving the turkey.

‘And I told you that if we were relying on the TARDIS, who

knew where we’d end up. It’s been so long since I’ve seen

everyone, I didn’t want to risk it. But at least I’m here now.’

‘You’re all here now,’ said the Brigadier, ‘and that’s all that’s important Thank you, Doctor. Thank you, everyone.’

The meat carved and the vegetables served, the Doctor remained

standing at the opposite end of the table and raised his glass.

‘I’m sure everyone wants to dive in, but before we do, I propose a toast. To faithful friends and a happy Christmas to all of you.’

General Sir Alistair Gordon Lethbridge-Stewart, otherwise

known as the Brigadier, raised a hand and happily joined in with his guests, as in unison they returned the Doctor’s toast.

‘Faithful friends.’

About the Authors

MICHAEL ABBERTON is presently exercising his new MA by

teaching English to Japanese undergraduates at Durham. His main

interests are fine-art photography and spending too much money on DVDs. Originally from Halifax, Michael has been a seminary student, insurance manager, hospital cleaner, Santa Claus, kitchen porter, lead guitarist, tea lady and Chuck Norris fanatic, in Spain, England and Japan. He is currently working on a Japanese horror novel.

DAN ABNETT is a novelist and award-winning comic book writer.

He has written 25 novels for the Black Library, including the

acclaimed *Gaunt's Ghosts* series and the *Eisenhorn* trilogy. His Black Library novel *Horus Rising* and his Torchwood novel *Border Princes* (for BBC Books) were both bestsellers. As a writer of comics, he has worked for all the major publishers, on everything from the *Mr Men* to the *X-Men*. He created the popular series *Sinister Dexter* for *2000*

AD, and is currently scripting *Superman* for DC Comics, and the acclaimed *Nova* for Marvel. He lives and works in Maidstone, Kent.

PETER ANGHELIDES has written for two previous *Doctor Who* Christmas collections. Other work for Big Finish includes short

fiction in the *Short Trips* collections *Companions*, *Steel Skies* and *Repercussions*, as well as two *Bernice Summerfield* anthologies, and an audio drama starring Elisabeth Sladen as Sarah Jane Smith. For the BBC he has written *Doctor Who* audios, books and short fiction.

Earlier this year, Peter's debut *Torchwood* novel was a UK bestseller.

His latest audio, featuring the Tenth Doctor and Donna, is published by BBC Audio in 2008.

SIMON BARNARD and **PAUL MORRIS** are the co-authors of Cosmic Hobo's *Scarifyers* audio series, starring *Doctor Who*'s Nicholas Courtney and Terry Molloy. When not writing about ghosts and ghouls, Simon is a radio producer and was once given a lift by Tom Baker. Paul has previously written for horror journal *Shivers* and the fanzines *God's Rude Wireless* and *SAD Magazine* (the latter of which he also, to his shame, edited), and makes a living by doing

'something with computers'.

TREVOR BAXENDALE was born in Liverpool in 1966. He has

been contributing to a variety of *Doctor Who* fiction ranges for both Big Finish and BBC Books for nearly ten years, including five novels, three audio plays and many short stories. He is also a contributor to *Doctor Who Adventures*, scripting the further exploits of the Doctor in comic-strip form. His latest *Doctor Who* novel, *Wishing Well*, is published this Christmas.

JOHN BINNS has edited four volumes of *Short Trips* for Big Finish

– *A Universe of Terrors*, *Steel Skies*, *Life Science* and *2040* – and has written stories for several others, as well as for the *Bernice Summerfield* anthologies *Life During Wartime* and *Missing Adventures*. *Snowman in Manhattan* is his first light-hearted romp. He writes regular columns for *Cult Times* and *TV Zone* magazines, and works as a criminal defence lawyer in London.

XANNA EVE CHOWN has been working as a writer and editor for ten years. Recently, she has designed a set of playing cards based on Lewis Carroll's *Hunting of the Snark*, edited children's magazines about horses, chess and talking dinosaurs (not all together) and writes an agony aunt column for a new age magazine. She has contributed

stories to several *Short Trips* anthologies, but this is one of her favourites so far. She loves the dark side of Christmas!

JONATHAN CLEMENTS's recent work includes the BBC radio

play *Doctor Who: Immortal Beloved*, and the novella *Cheating the Reaper* in the anthology *Bernice Summerfield: Old Friends*. His latest book is a biography of Marco Polo, and he has just completed a

history of Beijing, forthcoming in 2008.

NEIL CORRY is a freelance journalist, and works or has worked on a wide range of titles including *James Bond Spy Cards*, *Doctor Who Adventures, Film Review* (as editor), *Sugar*, *All About Soap* and many others. He still writes, when they let him, about film and TV. His previous Big Finish contributions are as the co-writer of the *Bernice Summerfield* audio *The Heart's Desire* (with David Bailey), and short stories in *Bernice Summerfield: A Life of Surprises* and *Short Trips: Defining Patterns*.

IAN FARRINGTON has compiled four *Short Trips* collections; *The Ghosts of Christmas* is his twenty-second and final book as the series's range editor. He has also written for the *Short Trips* anthologies *Life Science*, *A Day in the Life*, *Dalek Empire* and *Snapshots*, and for two *Professor Bernice Summerfield* collections.

Ian co-produced Big Finish's *UNIT* audio series, and was the assistant

producer of the company's *Doctor Who* audio ranges from 2002 until 2006. He has also contributed to *Doctor Who Magazine* and is currently

the sub-editor of *All About Soap*.

SCOTT HANOCOCK has written three audio plays for Big Finish, contributing two instalments to the first season of *Dark Shadows* (*The Book of Temptation* and *The Christmas Presence*) whilst also pitting Benny Summerfield against *The Oracle of Delphi*. Since then, he has appeared behind the microphone in series such as *Bernice*

Summerfield and *I, Davros*; inadvertently created a companion for the *Short Trips: Snapshots* anthology; and is currently working in Cardiff as part of the *Doctor Who Confidential* production team.

COLIN HARVEY is a writer and part-time academic living in south London with his partner and two children. Colin's short story *The Stinker* won the first *SFX* magazine Pulp Idol award in 200k. Colin has previously worked as a freelance video-game story designer for Sony, and his journalism has appeared in *The Guardian*, *Edge*, *Develop*, *RetroGamer* and *Scriptwriter*. For two years he contributed a regular column to the webzine *PopMatters*, and his academic book about *Grand Theft Auto*, entitled *Motion-Emotion*, was published in 2005 by the Italian company Ludologica. Colin wrote *The Eyes Have It*, which appeared in *Short Trips: Snapshots*, and is currently writing his first novel, a science fantasy adventure.

ANN KELLY is a maker of websites for the BBC, which is where she first came into close contact with *Doctor Who*. For four years, she painstakingly cleaned up mouldy telesnaps and replied to emails from people of varying degrees of insanity for the *Doctor Who* website.

She's currently combining the internet day job with a degree in

Sustainable Land Management down in Kent, as well as working on a traditional Hooden Horse Morris ceremony to take around the local pubs. This is the first story she's ever finished.

JOSEPH LIDSTER has written extensively for Big Finish's series of *Doctor Who* audio dramas, contributed scripts to their *Sapphire & Steel*, *Professor Bernice Summerfield*, *UNIT* and *Tomorrow People* ranges, and written numerous short stories for the company. In 2006, Joseph wrote fictional content for the BBC's *Doctor Who* and *Torchwood* spin-off websites. He recently abridged the *Torchwood* novels for audio and wrote the official blog for the Doctor's

companion, Martha Jones. In 2007, he wrote an episode for the

second series of BBC Television's *Torchwood*.

IAIN McLAUGHLIN and **CLAIRE BARTLETT** are journalists and writers working on the long-running *Beano* comic. They have written scripts for Big Finish's *Doctor Who* and *UNIT* series of plays and contributed short stories to two previous *Short Trips* anthologies, *Past Tense* and *Repercussions*. In 2005, they wrote *The Coming of the Queen*, a novel for Big Finish's *New Worlds* range. They have also written *Doctor Who*-related novellas for Telos and have written a number of scripts for the radio producer Imagination Theatre in America, for whom they also created the historical mystery series *Kerides The Thinker*.

MARK MAGRS is an English teacher but in previous incarnations he's been a copywriter, magazine editor and radio producer. This is his first published *Doctor Who* story – even though he's been making them up since he was about four. Mark's favourite thing about Christmas is watching *The Box of Delights* with his wife on dark Sunday evenings. And getting presents.

SCOTT MATTHEWMAN is assistant editor of *The Stage*, the British paper covering all aspects of the performing arts. In 2004, his website covering gay issues was named Best Political Weblog by *The Guardian*, and he now contributes on a regular basis to *TV Today*, *The Stage*'s blog about British television. He specialises in coverage of Saturday night entertainment, even when it doesn't involve a time-travelling police box.

EDDIE ROBSON is the author of the *Doctor Who* plays *Human Resources*, *Phobos*, *Memory Lane*, *The Condemned*, *I.D.* and *Urgent Calls*. He is the producer of Big Finish's *Bernice Summerfield* range, and wrote the plays *The Empire State*, *Freedom of Information* and *Beyond the Sea*. He has also written books about film noir and the Coen brothers; walkthrough guides to computer games; reviews, features and news for *SFX*, *Starburst* and *Cult Times*; and scripts for the comics anthologies *FutureQuake*, *Alien Safeword* and *Just 1 Page*. This is his eighth *Short Trip*. He lives in Lancaster.

GARY RUSSELL is a script editor for BBC Drama in Cardiff, working on *Doctor Who* and *Torchwood*. He recently wrote *Doctor Who: The Encyclopedia* for BBC Books and has written a number of fiction and non-fiction books over the past 12 years. Until 2006, he was an

audio producer at Big Finish, and before that his jobs have included magazine editor, publicity officer and a spot of acting.

RICHARD SALTER is the author of a number of published short stories and even more unpublished ones. All but one of his

professional gigs was for Big Finish – most recently in *Short Trips:* 287

The Centenarian. Last time he wrote a Christmas story, for *Short Trips: The History of Christmas*, he raided his mother-in-law's memories for inspiration. This time it's his own mother's turn. He is working on an exciting writing project, though his new baby will no doubt ensure he misses the deadline and you'll never get to see it.

STEVEN SAVILE has edited a number of anthologies and

collections, including the *Short Trips* anthology *Destination Prague*, as well as *Redbrick Eden*, *Elemental*, *Smoke Ghost & Other Apparitions* and *Black Gondolier and Other Stories*, the collected horror stories of Fritz Leiber. Steven is also the author of the Von Carstein Vampire trilogy, *Inheritance*, *Dominion* and *Retribution*, set in Games Workshop's popular *Warhammer* world, and has re-imagined the blood-thirsty celtic barbarian Slaine from *2000 AD* in a new duology of novels for Black Flame. He is currently writing a

novel based on the British television series *Primeval* and has recently finished working on an audio novel for *Torchwood*. Steven has written for *Star Wars* and *Jurassic Park* as well as his own novels and short stories, including *Houdini's Last Illusion* (Telos) and *Angel Road* (Elastic Press). In his copious spare time, Steven... erm...

writes... He was a runner-up in the British Fantasy Awards, and a winner of a Writers of the Future Award in 2002.

CAVAN SCOTT and **MARK WRIGHT** (editors) have collaborated on three audio plays in Big Finish's *Doctor Who* range and a number of short stories. Their first novel, *Project: Valhalla*, was published in 2005. Cavan is the editor of *BBC Countryfile* magazine and has written for Big Finish's *Tomorrow People* and *2000 AD* ranges. Mark is the production editor of *All About Soap*, and, as well as writing for the *Tomorrow People* series, adapted Bryan Talbot's classic comic series *The Adventures of Luther Arkwright* for audio. He also writes for the *TV Today* blog for *The Stage* newspaper.

SCOTT ALAN WOODARD earns the bulk of his income via his

day-to-day job as an award-winning on-air promo writer and producer based in Los Angeles, California. When he isn't concocting ten-to-60-second spots for various TV networks, he's busy at his home

keyboard writing any number of things including official audio plays based on *Doctor Who* and *Dark Shadows*. He lives in the LA area with his wife, who makes her living fabricating monsters for film and television.

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